

41st Anniversary Issue

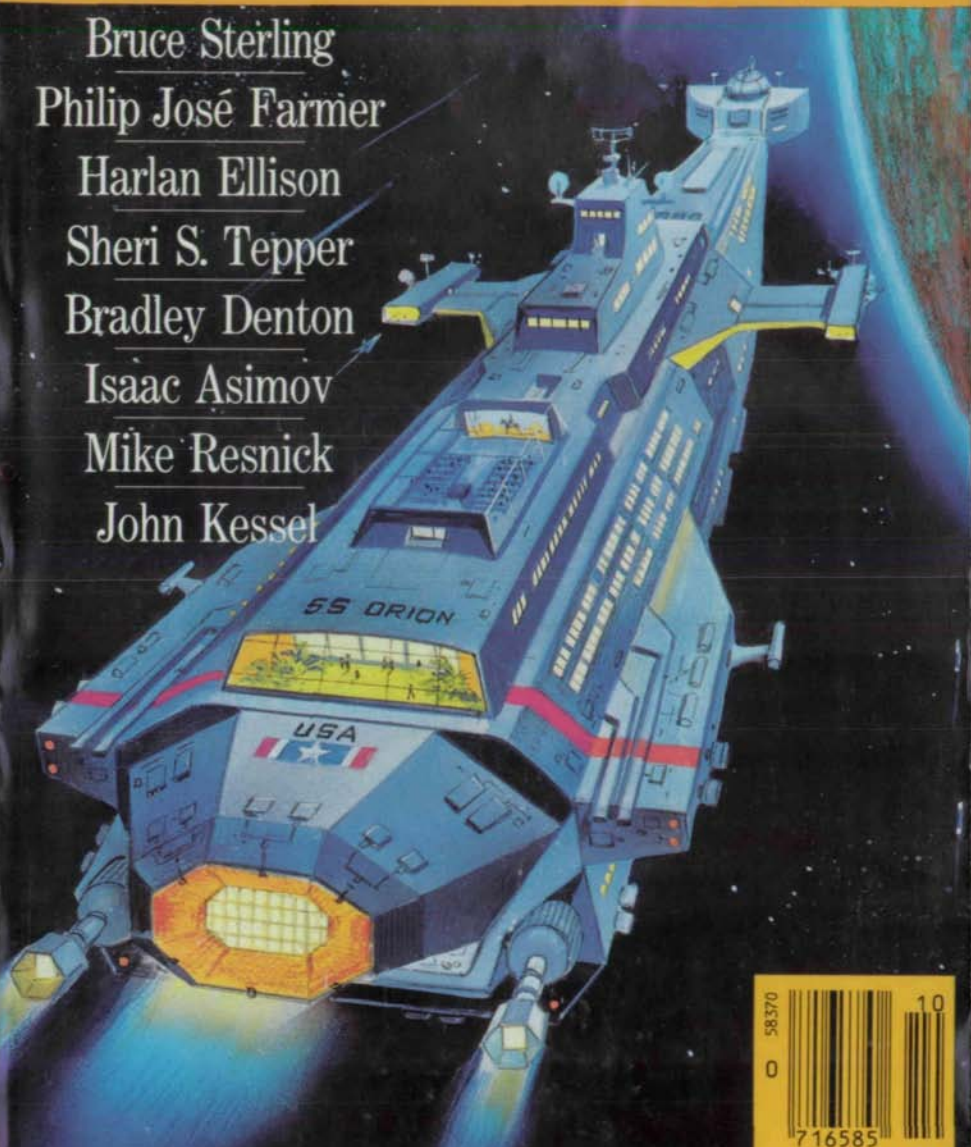
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Fantasy & Science Fiction

OCTOBER

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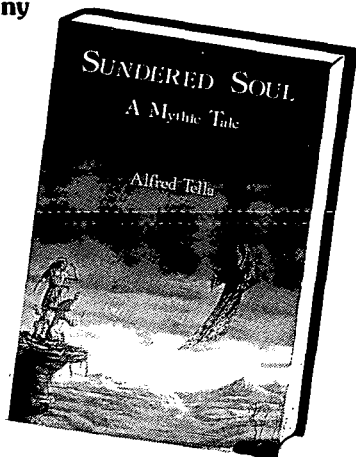
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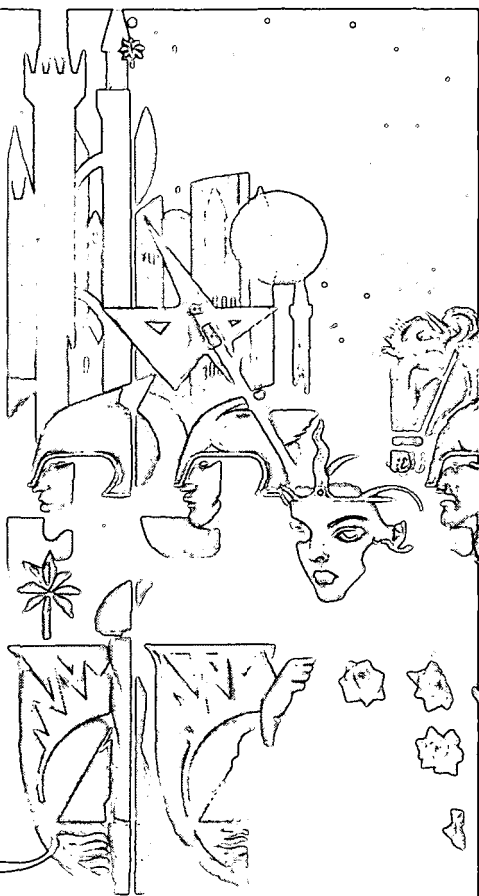


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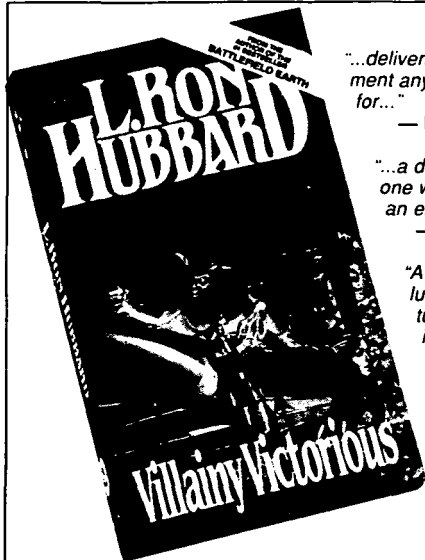
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T H E M A G A Z I N E O F
Fantasy & Science Fiction

OCTOBER • 41st Anniversary Issue

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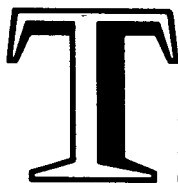
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John Kessel is still teaching at North Carolina State, writing novels — GOOD NEWS FROM OUTER SPACE (Tor) was a Nebula nominee — and still, thankfully, writing short stories, of which this inventive tale is the latest.

INVADERS

By John Kessel

15 November 1532:



HAT NIGHT NO ONE
slept. On the hills outside
Cajamarca, the campfires of

the Inca's army shone like so many stars in the sky. De Soto said Atahualpa had perhaps forty thousand troops under arms, but looking at the myriad lights spread across those hills, de Candia realized that estimate was, if anything, low.

Against them, Pizarro could throw one hundred foot soldiers, sixty horses, eight muskets, and four harquebuses. Pizarro, his brother Hernando, de Soto, and Belalcázar laid out plans for an ambush. De Candia and his artillery would be hidden in the building along one side of the square, the cavalry and infantry along the others. De Candia watched Pizzaro prowl through the camp that night, checking the men's armor, joking with them, reminding them of the treasure they would have, and the women. The men laughed nervously and whetted their swords.

They might sharpen them until their hands fell off; when morning dawned, they would be slaughtered. De Candia breathed deeply of the thin air and turned from the wall.

Ruiz de Arce, an infantryman with a face like a clenched fist, hailed him as he passed. "Are those guns of yours ready for some work tomorrow?"

"We need prayers more than guns."

"I'm not afraid of these brownies," de Arce said.

"Then you're a half-wit."

"Soto says they have no swords."

The man was probably just trying to reassure himself, but de Candia couldn't abide it. "Will you shut your stinking fool's trap! They don't need swords! If they only spit all at once, we'll be drowned."

Pizarro overheard him. He stormed over, grabbed de Candia's arm, and shook him. "Have they ever seen a horse, Candia? Have they ever felt steel? When you fired the harquebus on the seashore, didn't the town chief pour beer down its barrel as if it were a thirsty god? Pull up your balls and show me you're a man!"

His face was inches away. "Mark me! Tomorrow, Saint James sits on your shoulder, and we win a victory that will cover us in glory for five hundred years."

2 December 2001: "DEE-fense! DEE-fense!" the crowd screamed. During the two-minute warning, Norwood Delacroix ran over to the Redskins' special conditioning coach.

"My knee's about gone," said Delacroix, an outside linebacker with eyebrows that ran together and all the musculature that modern pharmacology could load onto his six-foot-five frame. "I need something."

"You need the power of prayer, my friend. Stoner's eating your lunch."

"Just do it."

The coach selected a popgun from his rack, pressed the muzzle against Delacroix's knee, and pulled the trigger. A flood of well-being rushed up Delacroix's leg. He flexed it tentatively. It felt better than the other one now. Delacroix jogged back onto the field. "DEE-fense!" the fans roared. The overcast sky began to spit frozen rain. The ref blew the whistle and the Bills broke huddle.

Delacroix looked across at Stoner, the Bills' tight end. The air throbbed

with electricity. The quarterback called the signals; the ball was snapped; Stoner surged forward. As Delacroix backpedaled furiously, sudden sunlight flooded the field. His ears buzzed. Stoner jerked left and went right, twisting Delacroix around like a cork in a bottle. His knee popped. Stoner had two steps on him. TD for sure. Delacroix pulled his head down and charged after him.

But instead of continuing downfield, Stoner slowed. He looked straight up into the air. Delacroix hit him at the knees, and they both went down. He'd caught him! The crowd screamed louder, a scream edged with hysteria.

Then Delacroix realized the buzzing wasn't just in his ears. Elation fading, he lifted his head and looked toward the sidelines. The coaches and players were running for the tunnels. The crowd boiled toward the exits, shedding thermoses and beer cups and radios. The sunlight was harshly bright. Delacroix looked up. A huge disk hovered no more than fifty feet above, pinning them in its spotlight. Stoner untangled himself from Delacroix, stumbled to his feet and ran off the field.

Holy Jesus and the Virgin Mary on toast, Delacroix thought.

He scrambled toward the end zone. The stadium was emptying fast, except for the ones who were getting trampled. The throbbing in the air increased in volume, lowered in pitch, and the flying saucer settled onto the NFL logo on the forty-yard line. The sound stopped as abruptly as if it had been sucked into a sponge.

Out of the corner of his eye, Delacroix saw an NBC cameraman come up next to him, focusing on the ship. Its side divided and a ramp extended itself to the ground. The cameraman fell back a few steps, but Delacroix held his ground. The inside glowed with the bluish light of a UV lamp.

A shape moved there. It lurched forward to the top of the ramp. A large, manlike thing, it advanced with a rolling stagger, like a college freshman at a beer blast. It wore a body-tight red stretchsuit, a white circle on its chest with a lightning bolt through it, some sort of flexible mask over its face. Blond hair covered its head in a kind of brush cut, and two cup-shaped ears poked comically out of the sides of its head. The creature stepped off onto the field, nudging aside the football that lay there.

Delacroix, who majored in public relations at Michigan State, went forward to greet it. This could be the beginning of an entirely new career. His knee felt great.

He extended his hand. "Welcome," he said. "I greet you in the name of humanity and the United States of America."

"Cocaine," the alien said. "We need cocaine."

Today: I sit at my desk writing a science fiction story, a tall, thin man wearing jeans, a white T-shirt with the abstract face of a man printed on it, white high-top basketball shoes, and gold-plated, wire-rimmed glasses.

In the morning I drink coffee to get me up for the day, and at night I have a gin and tonic to help me relax.

16 November 1532: "What are they waiting for, the shitting dogs!" One man next to de Arce said. "Are they trying to make us suffer?"

"Shut up, will you?" De Arce shifted his armor. Wedged into the stone building on the side of the square, sweating, they had been waiting since dawn, in silence for the most part except for the creak of leather, the uneasy jingle of cascabels on the horses' trappings. The men stank worse than the restless horses. Some had pissed themselves. A common foot soldier like de Arce was lucky to get a space near enough to the door to see out.

As noon came and went with still no sign of Atahualpa and his retinue, the mood of the men went from impatience to near panic. Then, late in the day, word came that the Indians were moving toward the town again.

An hour later, six thousand brilliantly costumed attendants entered the plaza. They were unarmed. Atahualpa, borne on a golden litter by eight men in cloaks of green feathers that glistened like emeralds in the sunset, rose above them. De Arce heard a slight rattling, looked down, and found that his hand, gripping the sword so tightly the knuckles stood out white, was shaking uncontrollably. He unknotted his fist from the hilt, rubbed the cramped fingers, and crossed himself.

"Quiet now, my brave ones," Pizarro said.

Father Valverde and Felipillo strode out to the center of the plaza, right through the sea of attendants. The priest had guts. He stopped before the litter of the Inca, short and steady as a fence post. "Greetings, my lord, in the name of Pope Clement VII, His Majesty the Emperor Charles V, and Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ."

Atahualpa spoke and Felipillo translated: "Where is this new god?"

Valverde held up the crucifix. "Our God died on the cross many years

ago and rose again to Heaven. He appointed the pope as his viceroy on earth, and the pope has commanded King Charles to subdue the peoples of the world and convert them to the true faith. The king sent us here to command your obedience and to teach you and your people in this faith."

"By what authority does this pope give away lands that aren't his?"

Valverde held up his Bible. "By the authority of the word of God."

The Inca took the Bible. When Valverde reached out to help him get the cover unclasped, Atahualpa cuffed his arm away. He opened the book and leafed through the pages. After a moment he threw it to the ground. "I hear no words," he said.

Valverde snatched up the book and stalked back toward Pizarro's hiding place. "What are you waiting for?" he shouted. "The saints and the Blessed Virgin, the bleeding wounds of Christ himself cry vengeance! Attack, and I'll absolve you!"

Pizarro had already stridden into the plaza. He waved his kerchief. "Santiago, and at them!"

On the far side, the harquebuses exploded in an enfilade. The lines of Indians jerked like startled cats. Bells jingling, de Soto's and Hernando's cavalry burst from the lines of doorways on the adjoining side. De Arce clutched his sword and rushed out with the others from the third side. He felt the power of God in his arm. "Santiago!" he roared at the top of his lungs, and hacked halfway through the neck of his first Indian. Bright blood spurted. He put his boot to the brown man's shoulder and yanked free, lunged for the belly of another wearing a kilt of bright red-and-white checks. The man turned and the sword caught between his ribs. The hilt was almost twisted from de Arce's grasp as the Indian went down. He pulled free, shrugged another man off his back, and daggered him in the side.

After the first flush of glory, it turned to filthy, hard work, an hour's wade through an ocean of butchery in the twilight, bodies heaped waist-high, boots skidding on the bloody stones. De Arce alone must have killed forty. Only after they'd slaughtered them all and captured the Sapa Inca did it end. A silence settled, broken only by the moans of dying Indians and distant shouts of the cavalry chasing the ones who had managed to break through the plaza wall to escape.

Saint James had indeed sat on their shoulders. Six thousand dead In-

dians, and not one Spaniard nicked. It was a pure demonstration of the power of prayer.

31 January 2002: It was Colonel Zipp's third session interrogating the alien. So far the thing had kept a consistent story, but not a credible one. The only thing that kept Zipp from panic at the thought of how his career would suffer if this continued was the rumor that his fellow case officers weren't doing any better with any of the others. That, and the fact that the Krel possessed technology that would reestablish American superiority for another two hundred years. He took a drag on his cigarette, the first of his third pack of the day.

"Your name?" Zipp asked.

"You may call me Flash."

Zipp studied the red union suit, the lightning bolt. With the flat chest, the rounded shoulders, pointed upper lip, and pronounced underbite, the alien looked like a cross between Wally Cleaver and the Mock Turtle. "Is this some kind of joke?"

"What is a joke?"

"Never mind." Zipp consulted his notes. "Where are you from?"

"God has ceded us an empire extending over sixteen solar systems in the Orion arm of the galaxy, including the systems around the stars you know as Tau Ceti, Epsilon Eridani, Alpha Centauri, and the red dwarf Barnard's Star."

"God gave you an empire?"

"Yes. We were hoping he'd give us your world, but all he kept talking about was your cocaine."

The alien's translating device had to be malfunctioning. "You're telling me that God sent you for cocaine?"

"No. He just told us about it. We collect chemical compounds for their aesthetic interest. These alkaloids do not exist on our world. Like the music you humans value so highly, they combine familiar elements — carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen, oxygen — in pleasing new ways."

The colonel leaned back, exhaled a cloud of smoke. "You consider cocaine like — like a symphony?"

"Yes. Understand, Colonel, no material commodity alone could justify the difficulties of interstellar travel. We come here for aesthetic reasons."

"You seem to know what cocaine is already. Why don't you just synthesize it yourself?"

"If you valued a unique work of aboriginal art, would you be satisfied with a mass-produced duplicate manufactured in your hometown? Of course not. And we are prepared to pay you well, in a coin you can use."

"We don't need any coins. If you want cocaine, tell us how your ships work."

"That is one of the coins we had in mind. Our ships operate according to a principle of basic physics. Certain fundamental physical reactions are subject to the belief system of the beings promoting them. If I believe that X is true, then X is more probably true than if I did not believe so."

The colonel leaned forward again. "We know that already. We call it the 'observer effect.' Our great physicist Werner Heisenberg—"

"Yes. I'm afraid we carry this principle a little further than that."

"What do you mean?"

Flash smirked. "I mean that our ships move through interstellar space by the power of prayer."

13 May 1533: Atahualpa offered to fill a room twenty-two feet long and seventeen feet wide with gold up to a line as high as a man could reach, if the Spaniards would let him go. They were skeptical. How long would this take? Pizarro asked. Two months, Atahualpa said.

Pizarro allowed the word to be sent out, and over the next several months, bearers, chewing the coca leaf in order to negotiate the mountain roads under such burdens, brought in tons of gold artifacts. They brought plates and vessels, life-sized statues of women and men, gold lobsters and spiders and alpacas, intricately fashioned ears of maize, every kernel reproduced, with leaves of gold and tassels of spun silver.

Martin Bueno was one of the advance scouts sent with the Indians to Cuzco, the capital of the empire. They found it to be the legendary city of gold. The Incas, having no money, valued precious metals only as ornament. In Cuzco the very walls of the Sun Temple, Coricancha, were plated with gold. Adjoining the temple was a ritual garden where gold maize plants supported gold butterflies, gold bees pollinated gold flowers.

"Enough loot that you'll shit in a different gold pot every day for the rest of your life," Bueno told his friend Diego Leguizano upon his return to Cajamarca.

They ripped the plating off the temple walls and had it carried to Cajamarca. There they melted it down into ingots.

The huge influx of gold into Europe was to cause an economic catastrophe. In Peru, at the height of the conquest, a pair of shoes cost \$850, and a bottle of wine \$1,700. When their old horseshoes wore out, iron being unavailable, the cavalry shod their horses with silver.

21 April 2003: In the executive washroom of Bellingham, Winston, and McNeese, Jason Prescott snorted a couple of lines and was ready for the afternoon. He returned to the brokerage to find the place in a whispering uproar. In his office sat one of the Krel. Prescott's secretary was about to piss himself. "It asked specifically for you," he said.

What would Attila the Hun do in this situation? Prescott thought. He went into the office. "Jason Prescott," he said. "What can I do for you, Mr. . . .?"

The alien's bloodshot eyes surveyed him. "Flash. I wish to make an investment."

"Investments are our business." Rumors had flown around the New York Merc for a month that the Krel were interested in investing. They had earned vast sums selling information to various computer, environmental, and biotech firms. Several of the aliens had come to observe trading in the currencies pit last week, and only yesterday, Jason had heard from a reliable source that they were considering opening an account with Merrill Lynch. "What brings you to our brokerage?"

"Not the brokerage. You. We heard that you are the most ruthless currencies trader in this city. We worship efficiency. You are efficient."

Right. Maybe there was a hallucinogen in the toot. "I'll call in some of our foreign-exchange experts. We can work up an investment plan for your consideration in a week."

"We already have an investment plan. We are, as you say in the markets, 'long' in dollars. We want you to sell dollars and buy francs for us."

"The franc is pretty strong right now. It's likely to hold for the next six months. We'd suggest —"

"We wish to buy \$50 billion worth of francs."

Prescott stared. "That's not a very good investment." Flash said nothing. The silence grew uncomfortable. "I suppose if we stretch it out over

a few months, and hit the exchanges in Hong Kong and London at the same time —"

"We want these francs bought in the next week. For the week after that, a second \$50 billion. Fifty billion a week until we tell you to stop."

Hallucinogens for sure. "That doesn't make any sense."

"We can take our business elsewhere."

Prescott thought about it. It would take every trick he knew — and he'd have to invent some new ones — to carry this off. The dollar was going to drop through the floor, while the franc would punch through the sell-stops of every trader on ten world markets. The exchanges would scream bloody murder. The repercussions would auger holes in every economy north of Antarctica. Governments would intervene. It would make the historic Hunt silver squeeze look like a game of Monopoly.

Besides, it made no sense. Not only was it criminally irresponsible, it was stupid. The Krel would squander every dime they'd earned.

Then he thought about the commission on \$50 billion a week.

Prescott looked across at the alien. From the right point of view, Flash looked like a barrel-chested college undergraduate from Special Effects U. He felt an urge to giggle, a euphoric feeling of power. "When do we start?"

19 May 1533: In the fields the *purics*, singing praise to Atahualpa, son of the sun, harvested the maize. At night they celebrated by getting drunk on *chicha*. It was, they said, the most festive month of the year.

Pedro Sancho did his drinking in the dark of the treasure room, in the smoke of the smelters' fire. For months he had been troubled by nightmares of the heaped bodies lying in the plaza. He tried to ignore the abuse of the Indian women, the brutality toward the men. He worked hard. As Pizarro's squire, it was his job to record daily the tally of Atahualpa's ransom. When he ran low on ink, he taught the *purics* to make it for him from soot and the juice of berries. They learned readily.

Atahualpa heard about the ink and one day came to him. "What are you doing with those marks?" he said, pointing to the scribe's tally book.

"I'm writing the list of gold objects to be melted down."

"What is this 'writing'?"

Sancho was nonplussed. Over the months of Atahualpa's captivity, Sancho had become impressed by the sophistication of the Incas. Yet they were also queerly backward. They had no money. It was not beyond be-

lief that they should not know how to read and write.

"By means of these marks, I can record the words that people speak. That's writing. Later other men can look at these marks and see what was said. That's reading."

"Then this is a kind of quipu?" Atahualpa's servants had demonstrated for Sancho the quipu, a system of knotted strings by which the Incas kept tallies. "Show me how it works," Atahualpa said.

Sancho wrote on the page: *God have mercy on us*. He pointed. "This, my lord, is a representation of the word 'God.'"

Atahualpa looked skeptical. "Mark it here." He held out his hand, thumbnail extended.

Sancho wrote "God" on the Inca's thumbnail.

"Say nothing now." Atahualpa advanced to one of the guards, held out his thumbnail. "What does this mean?" he asked.

"God," the man replied.

Sancho could tell the Inca was impressed, but he barely showed it. That the Sapa Inca had maintained such dignity throughout his captivity tore at Sancho's heart.

"This writing is truly a magical accomplishment," Atahualpa told him. "You must teach my *amautas* this art."

Later, when the viceroy Estete, Father Valverde, and Pizarro came to chide him for the slow pace of the gold shipments, Atahualpa tested each of them separately. Estete and Valverde each said the word "God." Atahualpa held his thumbnail out to the conquistador.

Estete chuckled. For the first time in his experience, Sancho saw Pizarro flush. He turned away. "I don't waste my time on the games of children," Pizarro said.

Atahualpa stared at him. "But your common soldiers have this art."

"Well, I don't."

"Why not?"

"I was a swineherd. Swineherds don't need to read."

"You are not a swineherd now."

Pizarro glared at the Inca. "I don't need to read to order you put to death." He marched out of the room.

After the others had left, Sancho told Atahualpa, "You ought not to humiliate the governor in front of his men."

"He humiliates himself," Atahualpa said. "There is no skill in which

a leader ought to let himself stand behind his followers."

Today: The part of this story about the Incas is as historically accurate as I could make it, but this Krel business is science fiction. I even stole the name "Krel" from a 1950s sf flick. I've been addicted to sf for years. In the evening my wife and I wash the bad taste of the news out of our mouths by watching old movies on videotape.

A scientist, asked why he read sf, replied, "Because in science fiction the experiments always work." Things in sf stories work out more neatly than in reality. Nothing is impossible. Spaceships move faster than light. Atomic weapons are neutralized. Disease is abolished. People travel in time. Why, Isaac Asimov even wrote a story once that ended with the reversal of entropy!

The descendants of the Incas, living in grinding poverty, find their most lucrative crop in coca, which they refine into cocaine and sell in vast quantities to North Americans.

23 August 2008: "Catalog number 208," said John Bostock. "Georges Seurat, *Bathers*."

FRENCH GOVERNMENT FALLS, the morning *Times* had announced. JAPAN BANS U.S. IMPORTS. FOOD RIOTS IN MADRID. But Bostock had barely glanced at the newspaper over his coffee; he was buzzed on caffeine and adrenaline, and it was too late to stop the auction, the biggest day of his career. The lot list would make an art historian faint. *Guernica*. *The Potato Eaters*. *The Scream*. Miró, Rembrandt, Vermeer, Gauguin, Matisse, Constable, Magritte, Pollock, Mondrian. Six desperate governments had contributed to the sale. And rumor had it the Krel would be among the bidders.

The rumor proved true. In the front row, beside the solicitor Patrick McClannahan, sat one of the unlikely aliens, wearing red tights and a lightning-bolt insignia. The famous Flash. The creature sat there lazily while McClannahan did the bidding with a discreetly raised forefinger.

Bidding on the Seurat started at a million and went orbital. It soon became clear that the main bidders were Flash and the U.S. Government. The American campaign against cultural imperialism was getting a lot of press, ironic since the Yanks could afford to challenge the Krel only because of the technology the Krel had lavished on them. The probability

suppressor that prevented the detonation of atomic weapons. The autodidactic antivirus that cured most diseases. There was talk of an immortality drug. Of a time machine. So what if the European Community was in the sixth month of an economic crisis that threatened to dissolve the unifying efforts of the past twenty years? So what if Krel meddling destroyed humans' capacity to run the world? The Americans were making money, and the Krel were richer than Croesus.

The bidding reached \$1.2 billion, at which point the American ambassador gave up. Bostock tapped his gavel. "Sold," he said in his most cultured voice, nodding toward the alien.

The crowd murmured. The American stood. "If you can't see what they're doing to us, then you don't deserve our help!"

For a minute, Bostock thought the auction was going to turn into a riot. Then the new owner of the pointillist masterpiece stood, smiled. Ingenuous, clumsy. "We know that there has been considerable disquiet over our purchase of these historic works of art," Flash said. "Let me promise you, they will be displayed where all humans — not just those who can afford to visit the great museums — can see them."

The crowd's murmur turned into applause. Bostock put down his gavel and joined in. The American ambassador and his aides stalked out. Thank God, Bostock thought. The attendants brought out the next item.

"Catalog number 209," Bostock said. "Leonardo da Vinci, *Mona Lisa*."

26 July 1533: The soldiers, seeing the heaps of gold grow, became anxious. They consumed stores of coca meant for the Inca messengers. They fought over women. They grumbled over the airs of Atahualpa. "Who does he think he is? The governor treats him like a hidalgo."

Father Valverde cursed Pizarro's inaction. That morning, after Matins, he spoke with Estete. "The governor has agreed to meet and decide what to do," Estete said.

"It's about time. What about Soto?" De Soto was against harming Atahualpa. He maintained that, since the Inca had paid the ransom, he should be set free, no matter what danger this would present. Pizzaro had stalled. Last week he had sent de Soto away to check out rumors that the Tahuantinsuyans were massing for an attack to free the Sapa Inca.

Estete smiled. "Soto's not back yet."

They went to the building Pizarro had claimed as his, and found the

others already gathered. The Incas had no tables or proper chairs, so the Spaniards were forced to sit in a circle on mats as the Indians did. Pizarro, only a few years short of threescore, sat on a low stool of the sort that Atahualpa used when he held court. His left leg, whose old battle wound still pained him at times, was stretched out before him. His loose white shirt had been cleaned by some *puric's* wife. Valverde sat beside him. Gathered were Estete, Belalcázar, Almagro, de Candia, Riquelme, Pizarro's young cousin Pedro, the scribe Pedro Sancho, Valverde, and the governor himself.

As Valverde and Estete had agreed, the viceroy went first. "The men are jumpy, Governor," Estete said. "The longer we stay cooped up here, the longer we give these savages the chance to plot against us."

"We should wait until Soto returns," de Candia said, already looking guilty as a dog. "We've got nothing but rumors so far. I won't kill a man on a rumor."

Silence. Trust de Candia to speak aloud what they were all thinking but were not ready to say. The man had no political judgment — but maybe it was just as well to face it directly. Valverde seized the opportunity. "Atahualpa plots against us even as we speak," he told Pizarro. "As governor, you are responsible for our safety. Any court would convict him of treason, and execute him."

"He's a king," de Candia said. Face flushed, he spat out a cud of leaves. "We don't have authority to try him. We should ship him back to Spain and let the emperor decide what to do."

"This is not a king," Valverde said. "It isn't even a man. It is a creature that worships demons, that weaves spells about half-wits like Candia. You saw him discard the Bible. Even after my months of teaching, after the extraordinary mercies we've shown him, he doesn't acknowledge the primacy of Christ! He cares only for his wives and his pagan gods. Yet he's satanically clever. Don't think we can let him go. If we do, the day will come when he'll have our hearts for dinner."

"We can take him with us to Cuzco," Belalcázar said. "We don't know the country. His presence would guarantee our safe conduct."

"We'll be traveling over rough terrain, carrying tons of gold, with not enough horses," Almagro said. "If we take him with us, we'll be ripe for ambush at every pass."

"They won't attack if we have him."

"He could escape. We can't trust the rebel Indians to stay loyal to us. If they turned to our side, they can just as easily turn back to his."

"And remember, he escaped before, during the civil war," Valverde said. "Huáscar, his brother, lived to regret that. If Atahualpa didn't hesitate to murder his own brother, do you think he'll stop for us?"

"He's given us his word," Candia said.

"What good is the word of a pagan?"

Pizarro, silent until now, spoke. "He has no reason to think the word of a Christian much better."

Valverde felt his blood rise. Pizarro knew as well as any of them what was necessary. What was he waiting for? "He keeps a hundred wives! He betrayed his brother! He worships the sun!" The priest grabbed Pizarro's hand, held it up between them so they could both see the scar there, where Pizarro had gotten cut preventing one of his own men from killing Atahualpa. "He isn't worth an ounce of the blood you spilled to save him."

"He's proved worth twenty-four tons of gold." Pizarro's eyes were hard and calm.

"There is no alternative!" Valverde insisted. "He serves the Antichrist! God demands his death."

At last Pizarro seemed to have gotten what he wanted. He smiled. "Far be it from me to ignore the command of God," he said. "Since God forces us to it, let's discuss how He wants it done."

5 October 2009: "What a lovely country Chile is from the air. You should be proud of it."

"I'm from Los Angeles," Leon Sepulveda said. "And as soon as we close this deal, I'm going back."

"The mountains are impressive."

"Nothing but earthquakes and slag. You can have Chile."

"Is it for sale?"

Sepulveda stared at the Krel. "I was just kidding."

They sat at midnight in the arbor, away from the main buildings of Iguassu Microelectronics of Santiago. The night was cold and the arbor was overgrown and the bench needed a paint job — but then, a lot of things had been getting neglected in the past couple of years. All the more reason to put yourself in a financial situation where you didn't have to worry. Though Sepulveda had to admit that, since the advent of the Krel,

such positions were harder to come by, and less secure once you had them.

Flash's earnestness aroused a kind of horror in him. It had something to do with Sepulveda's suspicion that this thing next to him was as superior to him as he was to a guinea pig, plus the alien's aura of drunken adolescence, plus his own willingness, despite the feeling that the situation was out of control, to make a deal with it. He took another Valium and tried to calm down.

"What assurance do I have that this time-travel method will work?"

"It will work. If you don't like it in Chile, or back in Los Angeles, you can use it to go into the past."

Sepulveda swallowed. "O.K. You need to read and sign these papers."

"We don't read."

"You don't read Spanish? How about English?"

"We don't read at all. We used to, but we gave it up. Once you start reading, it gets out of control. You tell yourself you're just going to stick to nonfiction — but pretty soon you graduate to fiction. After that, you can't kick the habit. And then there's the oppression."

"Oppression?"

"Sure. I mean, I like a story as much as the next Krel, but any pharmacologist can show that arbitrary cultural, sexual, and economic assumptions determine every significant aspect of a story. Literature is a political tool used by ruling elites to ensure their hegemony. Anyone who denies that is a fish who can't see the water it swims in. Or the fascist who tells you, as he beats you, that those blows you feel are your own delusion."

"Right. Look, can we settle this? I've got things to do."

"This is, of course, the key to temporal translation. The past is another arbitrary construct. Language creates reality. Reality is smoke."

"Well, this time machine better not be smoke. We're going to find out the truth about the past. Then we'll change it."

"By all means. Find the truth." Flash turned to the last page of the contract, pricked his thumb, and marked a thumbprint on the signature line.

After they sealed the agreement, Sepulveda walked the alien back to the courtyard. A Krel flying pod with Vermeer's *The Letter* varnished onto its door sat at the focus of three spotlights. The painting was scorched almost into unrecognizability by atmospheric friction. The door peeled

downward from the top, became a canvas-surfaced ramp.

"I saw some interesting lines inscribed on the coastal desert on the way here," Flash said. "A bird, a tree, a big spider. In the sunset, it looked beautiful. I didn't think you humans were capable of such art. Is it for sale?"

"I don't think so. That was done by some old Indians a long time ago. If you're really interested, though, I can look into it."

"Not necessary." Flash wagged his ears, wiped his feet on Mark Rothko's *Earth and Green* and staggered into the pod.

26 July 1533: Atahualpa looked out of the window of the stone room in which he was kept, across the plaza where the priest Valverde stood outside his chapel after his morning prayers. Valverde's chapel had been the house of the virgins; the women of the house had long since been raped by the Spanish soldiers, as the house had been by the Spanish god. Valverde spoke with Estete. They were getting ready to kill him, Atahualpa knew. He had known ever since the ransom had been paid.

He looked beyond the thatched roofs of the town to the crest of the mountains, where the sun was about to break in his tireless circuit of Tahuantinsuyu. The cold morning air raised dew on the metal of the chains that bound him hand and foot. The metal was queer, different from the bronze the *purics* worked or the gold and silver Atahualpa was used to wearing. If gold was the sweat of the sun, and silver the tears of the moon, what was this metal, dull and hard like the men who held him captive, yet strong, too — stronger, he had come to realize, than the Inca. It, like the men who brought it, was beyond his experience. It gave evidence that Tahuantinsuyu, the Four Quarters of the World, was not all the world after all. Atahualpa had thought none but savages lived beyond their lands. He'd imagined no man readier to face the ruthless necessity than himself. He had ordered the death of Huáscar, his own brother. But he was learning that these men were capable of enormities against which the Inca civil war would seem a minor discomfort.

That evening they took him out of the building to the plaza. In the plaza's center, the soldiers had piled a great heap of wood on flagstones, some of which were still stained with the blood of his six thousand slaughtered attendants. They bound him to a stake amid the heaped fagots, and Valverde appealed one last time for the Inca to renounce

Satan and be baptized. He promised that if Atahualpa would do so, he would earn God's mercy: they would strangle him rather than burn him to death.

The rough wood pressed against his spine. Atahualpa looked at the priest, and the men gathered around, and the women weeping beyond the circle of soldiers. The moon, his mother, rode high above. Firelight flickered on the breastplates of the Spaniards, and from the waiting torches drifted the smell of pitch. The men shifted nervously. Creak of leather, clink of metal. Men on horses shod with silver. Sweat shining on Valverde's forehead. Valverde stared at Atahualpa as if he desired something, but was prepared to destroy him without getting it if need be. The priest thought he was showing Atahualpa resolve, but Atahualpa saw that beneath Valverde's face he was a dead man. Pizarro stood aside, with the Spanish viceroy Estete and the scribe. Pizarro was an old man. He ought to be sitting quietly in some village, outside the violence of life, giving advice and teaching the children. What kind of world did he come from, that sent men into old age still charged with the lusts and bitterness of the young?

Pizarro, too, looked as if he wanted this to end.

Atahualpa knew that it would not end. This was only the beginning. These men would suffer for this moment as they had already suffered for it all their lives, seeking the pain blindly over oceans, jungles, deserts, probing it like a sore tooth until they'd found and grasped it in this plaza of Cajamarca, thinking they sought gold. They'd come all this way to create a moment that would reveal to them their own incurable disease. Now they had it. In a few minutes, they thought, it would at last be over, that once he was gone, they would be free — but Atahualpa knew it would be with them ever after, and with their children and grandchildren and the million others of their race in times to come, whether they knew of this hour in the plaza or not, because they were sick and would pass the sickness on with their breath and semen. They could not burn out the sickness so easily as they could burn the Son of God to ash. This was a great tragedy, but it contained a huge jest. They were caught in a wheel of the sky and could not get out. They must destroy themselves.

"Have it your way, priest," Atahualpa said. "Then strangle me, and bear my body to Cuzco, to be laid with my ancestors." He knew they would not do it, and so would add an additional curse to their faithlessness.

He had one final curse. He turned to Pizarro. "You will have responsibility for my children."

Pizarro looked at the pavement. They put up the torch and took Atahualpa from the pyre. Valverde poured water on his head and spoke words in the tongue of his god. Then they sat him upon a stool, bound him to another stake, set the loop of cord around his neck, slid the rod through the cord, and turned it. His women knelt at his side and wept. Valverde spoke more words. Atahualpa felt the cord, woven by the hands of some faithful *puric* of Cajamarca, tighten. The cord was well made. It cut his access to the night air; Atahualpa's lungs fought, he felt his body spasm, and then the plaza became cloudy and he heard the voice of the moon.

12 January 2011: Israel Lamont was holding big-time when a Krel monitor zipped over the alley. A minute later one of the aliens lurched around the corner and approached him. Lamont was ready.

"I need to achieve an altered state of consciousness," the alien said. It wore a red suit, a lightning bolt on its chest.

"I'm your man," Lamont said. "You just try this. Best stuff on the street." He held the vial out in the palm of his hand. "Go ahead, try it." The Krel took it.

"How much?"

"One million."

The Krel gave him a couple hundred thousand. "Down payment," it said. "How does one administer this?"

"What, you don't know? I thought you guys were hip."

"I have been working hard, and am unacquainted."

This was ripe. "You burn it," Lamont said.

The Krel started toward the trash-barrel fire. Before he could empty the vial into it, Lamont stopped him. "Wait up, homes! You use a pipe. Here, I'll show you."

Lamont pulled a pipe from his pocket, torched up, and inhaled. The Krel watched him. Brown eyes like a dog's. Goofy honkie face. The rush took him, and Lamont saw in the alien's face a peculiar need. The thing was hungry. Desperate.

"I may try?" The alien reached out. Its hand trembled.

Lamont handed over the pipe. Clumsily, the creature shook a block of crack into the bowl. Its beaklike upper lip, however, prevented it from

getting its mouth tight against the stem. It fumbled with the pipe, from somewhere producing a book of matches. "Shit, I'll light it," Lamont said.

The Krel waited while Lamont held his Bic over the bowl. Nothing happened. "Inhale, man."

The creature inhaled. The blue flame played over the crack; smoke boiled through the bowl. The creature drew in steadily for what seemed to be minutes. Serious capacity. The crack burned totally through. Finally the Krel exhaled.

It looked at Lamont. Its eyes were bright.

"Good shit?" Lamont said.

"A remarkable stimulant effect."

"Right." Lamont looked over his shoulder toward the alley's entrance. It was getting dark. Yet he hesitated to ask for the rest of the money.

"Will you talk with me?" the Krel asked, swaying slightly.

Surprised, Lamont said, "O.K. Come with me."

Lamont led the Krel back to a deserted store that abutted the alley. They went inside and sat down on some crates against the wall.

"Something I been wondering about you," Lamont said. "You guys are coming to own the world. You fly across the planets, Mars and that shit. What you want with crack?"

"We seek to broaden our minds."

Lamont snorted. "Right. You might as well hit yourself in the head with a hammer."

"We seek escape," the alien said.

"I don't buy that, neither. What you got to escape from?"

The Krel looked at him. "Nothing."

They smoked another pipe. The Krel leaned back against the wall, arms at its sides like a limp doll. It started a queer coughing sound, chest spasming. Lamont thought it was choking and tried to slap it on the back. "Don't do that," it said. "I'm laughing."

"Laughing? What's so funny?"

"I lied to Colonel Zipp," it said. "We want cocaine for kicks."

Lamont relaxed a little. "I hear you now."

"We do everything for kicks."

"Makes for hard living."

"Better than maintaining consciousness continuously without interruption."

"You said it."

"Human beings cannot stand too much reality," the Krel said. "We don't blame you. Human beings! Digust, horror, shame. Nothing personal."

"You bet."

"Nonbeing penetrates that in which there is no space."

"Uh-huh."

The alien laughed again. "I lied to Sepulveda, too. Our time machines take people to the past they believe in. There is no other past. You can't change it."

"Who the fuck's Sepulveda?"

"Let's do some more," it said.

They smoked one more. "Good shit," it said. "Just what I wanted."

The Krel slid off the crate. Its head lolled. "Here is the rest of your payment," it whispered, and died.

Lamont's heart raced. He looked at the Krel's hand, lying open on the floor. In it was a full-sized ear of corn, fashioned of gold, with tassles of finely spun silver wire.

Today: It's not just physical laws that science fiction readers want to escape. Just as commonly, they want to escape human nature. In pursuit of this, sf offers comforting alternatives to the real world. For instance, if you start reading an sf story about some abused wimp, you can be pretty sure that by chapter two he's going to discover he has secret powers unavailable to those tormenting him, and by the end of the book, he's going to save the universe. Sf is full of this sort of thing, from the power fantasy of the alienated child to the alternate history where Hitler is strangled in his cradle and the Library of Alexandria is saved from the torch.

Science fiction may in this way be considered as much an evasion of reality as any mind-distorting drug. I know that sounds a little harsh, but think about it. An alkaloid like cocaine or morphine invades the central nervous system. It reduces pain, produces euphoria, enhances our perceptions. Under its influence we imagine we have supernormal abilities. Limits dissolve. Soon, hardly aware of what's happened to us, we're addicted.

Science fiction has many of the same qualities. The typical reader comes to sf at a time of suffering. He seizes on it as a way to deal with his pain. It's bigger than his life. It's astounding. Amazing. Fantastic. Some

grow out of it; many don't. Anyone who's been around sf for a while can cite examples of longtime readers as hooked and deluded as crack addicts.

Like any drug addict, the sf reader finds desperate justifications for his habit. SF teaches him science. Sf helps him avoid "future shock." Sf changes the world for the better. Right. So does cocaine.

Having been an sf user myself, however, I have to say that, living in a world of cruelty, immersed in a culture that grinds people into fish meal like some brutal machine, with histories of destruction stretching behind us back to the Pleistocene, I find it hard to sneer at the desire to escape. Even if escape is delusion.

18 October 1527: Timu drove the foot plow into the ground, leaned back to break the crust, drew out the pointed pole, and backed up a step to let his wife, Collyur, turn the earth with her hoe. To his left was his brother, Okya; and to his right, his cousin, Tupa; before them, their wives planting the seed. Most of the *purics* of Cajamarca were there, strung out in a line across the terrace, the men wielding the foot plows, and the women or children carrying the sacks of seed potatoes.

As he looked up past Collyur's shoulders to the edge of the terrace, he saw a strange man approach from the post road. The man stumbled into the next terrace up from them, climbed down steps to their level. He was plainly excited.

Collyur was waiting for Timu to break the next row; she looked up at him questioningly.

"Who is that?" Timu said, pointing past her at the man.

She stood up straight and looked over her shoulder. The other men had noticed, too, and stopped their work.

"A *chasqui* come from the next town," said Okya.

"A *chasqui* would go to the *curaca*," said Tupa.

"He's not dressed like a *chasqui*," Timu said.

The man came up to them. Instead of a cape, loincloth and flowing *onka*, the man wore uncouth clothing: cylinders of fabric that bound his legs tightly, a white short-sleeved shirt that bore on its front the face of a man, and flexible white sandals that covered all his foot to the ankle. He shivered in the spring cold.

He was extraordinarily tall. His face, paler than a normal man's, was long, his nose too straight, mouth too small, and lips too thin. Upon

his face he wore a device of gold wire that, hooking over his ears, held disks of crystal before his eyes. The man's hands were large, his limbs long and spiderlike. He moved suddenly, awkwardly.

Gasping for air, the stranger spoke rapidly the most abominable Quechua Timu had ever heard.

"Slow down," Timu said. "I don't understand."

"What year is this?" the man asked.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, what is the year?"

"It is the thirty-fourth year of the reign of the Sapa Inca Huayna Capac."

The man spoke some foreign word. "God damn," he said in a language foreign to Timu, but which you or I would recognize as English. "I made it."

Timu went to the *curaca*, and the *curaca* told Timu to take the stranger in. The stranger told them that his name was "Chuan." But Timu's three-year-old daughter, Curi, reacting to the man's sudden gestures, unearthly thinness, and piping speech, laughed and called him "the Bird." So he was ever after to be known in that town.

There he lived a long and happy life, earned trust and respect, and brought great good fortune. He repaid them well for their kindness, alerting the people of Tahuantinsuyu to the coming of the invaders. When the first Spaniards landed on their shores a few years later, they were slaughtered to the last man, and everyone lived happily ever after.

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BOOKS

A L G I S B U D R Y S

Polar City Blues, Katharine Kerr, Bantam Spectra, \$4.50

Mona Lisa Overdrive, William Gibson, Bantam Spectra, \$4.95

Science Fiction, Fantasy & Horror: 1984, Charles N. Brown and William G. Contento, Locus Press, \$50.00 plus \$3.00 shipping. Locus Press, P.O. Box 13305, Oakland, CA 94661.

WELL, YOU may well wonder. But I thought we would review *Polar City Blues*, which the author frankly dubs "an entertainment," meaning less by it than when Graham Greene does the same thing, and then we would review *Mona Lisa Overdrive* because, and then we would . . . Well, never mind. You'll see.

Polar City Blues is interesting, first of all, because Katharine Kerr normally writes fantasy. But for reasons of her own, this one time she decided to try science fiction, and the result is not at all bad, considering that it is lightweight. It

moves along pretty well, and it has some genuinely exciting moments in it, and it has some moments in which it almost, but not quite, fails utterly. Certainly there are two or four or perhaps even more books out at the same time which deserve reviewing just as much.

Well, that's as may be. But it occurred to me that it's been a long time since we reviewed a book just for the hell of it; we've been sitting in judgement, all solemn, for many's the column, now, and it's time we broke that string.

Polar City Blues begins with a murder — the murder of an alien, on an alien planet inhabited by two alien races and a generally scruffy group of Earthmen, none of them native to the place. It's a backwater sort of a place, out on the Galactic Rim somewhere, and none of the inhabitants are very bright, or very attractive, or very anything. Nevertheless, some of them develop charms as the story progresses.

Chief Al Bates, for instance, Chief of Police, tries to be as human as he can. He enlists the aid of

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Mulligan, human psychic, because Mulligan happens to pass by the scene of the crime very shortly thereafter, he may have some insights into the crime, and besides he needs the money. Instead, Mulligan goes into a fit; shrieks, howls, then passes out cold.

Next we meet Nunks, a friend of Mulligan's, not very humanoid (Kerr says "hominoid") but close enough, who rescues Mulligan from the Polar City Emergency Center, speaking with him telepathically — since Nunks' race can speak in no other way — and takes him to Nunks' boss, Lacey, who is a former officer in a space navy but was cashiered for obscure reasons and is now (a) not bad to look at and (b) engaged in various nefarious enterprises. She does not know she is in love with Mulligan. Mulligan does not know she is in love with him — he just wishes she was. And so the tale continues.

I cannot say there are any great surprises in it. Mrs. Bug looks promising, for a while, and certainly never trails off into inconsiderability, but on the other hand she gets some of the polish taken off her when she suddenly decides that Nunks is all right after all, which he is but what, specifically, did he do to change her mind at *that* particular moment? And there's the fact that Mr. Bug is, in the end, not

what he seemed throughout most of this drama.

I like the assassin. He seems to have been well motivated from youth, and well trained. He certainly makes an impressive show, and seems to me to die in a most satisfactory manner in the end. And the rag-tag elements who live in the slum section of town seem well realized. Mind you, there is not, really, one character in this *potage* whom you have not met before in another book, except for Nunks, whom you met as Chewbacca. But the pieces are well combined, Kerr hardly ever makes the mistake of letting the action slow, and she keeps piling Pelion on Ossa well enough so that, in the end, you are pleased to have read the book. Nor were you sorry while you were reading it.

The question, really, is not in the book, but in its creation in the first place. What prompted Katharine Kerr to write this particular book, and, she having written, what prompted Bantam Spectra to publish it? It's not that it's a bad book — it's a good book, given its limitations — and certainly Bantam Spectra has nothing to be ashamed of. But there is nothing extraordinary about it, on any level. Which leads me to the question. What is the answer?

Well, I think there may be

factors here which I would not be in position to know. For instance, this may be part of a multiple book contract, and while no one at Bantam was actively happy to have this book, it never occurred to them that they ought to be sad about it — as, indeed, they ought not.

And I think that there may have been a feeling at Bantam that if someone was going to write a book with the old reliables in it, and was going to write it passing well, and wasn't going to disgrace herself or Bantam thereby, Katharine Kerr was at least as good a candidate as any. And they were right. You are going to enjoy this book, though you are liable to forget it almost immediately thereafter.

Maybe that's what's troubling me. I'm sorry — I promised you I'd be lighthearted, and it turns out I was lying. But it *does* trouble me, that at a time when most publishers are cutting back, and most editors are looking for the extraordinary, Bantam has chosen to publish a merely good book.

Well, that certainly wasn't true of *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, which first came out in a Bantam hardcover in November of 1988 and in the paperback in December of 1989. Much was expected of this book, and much was gotten, if the words of high praise from various big-time

newspapers quoted in the front of the paperback edition are any indication. I wonder how well it sold in comparison to *Neuromancer* and *Count Zero*, a moot question since the marketing was quite different, so we shall never know which of these three books was best received by the public on a dead-level start.

I didn't review it when it came out, in either the hardcover or the paperback, for a quirky reason. I had reviewed *Neuromancer* and *Count Zero*, and liked them quite well. But I became curious to see what would happen if I laid off — if I waited, in short, some eighteen months, and saw what the effect of time would be on a reading of the book. I don't know it's fair, though I don't see why not. I do know that I did it.

And either because I allowed the time to pass, and a certain excitement of the moment is missing, or more likely because Gibson himself just wanted to get this book out of the way, *Mona Lisa Overdrive* in fact is not an important book.

A lot of things are right with it; it's an attractive book, it's in some ways a more mature book than its two predecessors, and all that. But it doesn't represent any advance, at all, over its predecessors. In fact, it's less of a book, in scope, than *Count Zero*, by a considerable margin; it has all over it the signs of a book

written only to tie up loose ends in the previous books, however engagingly they be tied.

Now, this gives one some pause. Gibson is the most important writer the SF field has seen in years, and I hasten to add that this book does nothing to change that; it will never change, no matter how many bad books Gibson writes, as long as he does not write too many dull ones. (And there's not the slightest sign of his even considering being dull.) But it gives one some slight pause to contemplate the likeliest explanation for this book, which is that Gibson simply wanted to complete his *Neuromancer* trilogy whether it truly needed it or not. (I happen to think it did not; I didn't think there was a *Neuromancer* trilogy.)

But perhaps you are wondering what the hell I'm talking about, being one of the ten people who hasn't read this book. Or perhaps even being the one person who hasn't heard of William Gibson.

Okay. Some years ago, a practically total unknown named William Gibson won the Hugo, the Nebula, and the Philip K. Dick Awards for an Ace Special novel — that is, *imprimis*, a first novel of extraordinary quality — called *Neuromancer*. This is not a feat likely to be repeated, ever. And *Neuromancer* introduced the concept soon to be-

come known as Cyberpunk; the story of "cowboys" plugged directly into computers, so that they lived not in reality but in virtual reality, experiencing computer-driven analogues of reality, skulking in to supposedly guarded databanks in the same way a henchman invaded a medieval castle. This was set against the background of the near future, dominated by Japan, but with other nations prominent in such areas as genetic engineering. America was a second-rate power.

This construct kicked off a horde of imitations, some quite good, and a horde of imitators, some quite good, and by and large in this quarter, at least, much more good than bad has come of it. When Gibson published *Count Zero*, the second of these books (and a short-story collection, *Burning Chrome*, too), he added features — a man lying at the focus of an intense life-support system; a satellite culture of considerable depth, and, most important, voodoo — which were vivid, inventive, and, most important, infused with importance. And I said that Gibson was due to abandon this mode; that he had done with it as much as he was going to do with it, and that his talents would turn in other directions, leaving the Cyberpunk movement behind to fill in the gaps for him, and go on doing good if not

quite toplevel work for years to come, in other hands.

Mona Lisa Overdrive on the other hand is a story set largely in a decrepit former factory, in a wasted stretch of land, and though it is bleaker and more inclined toward violence than its predecessors, it is not inventive; not a single concept, as far as I can see, is new. And some of the concepts are borrowed, as for instance the central story of *Mona*, who it turns out will replace *Angie*, in a good-enough sequence that nevertheless has been done before by others.

Mind you, this is a good book, and well worth reading. But the fact is it could have been done by any one of a dozen writers who had read *Neuromancer* and *Count Zero*. Gibson should not have wasted his time on it.

I think — I think — that he is

hatching something, and that he simply did this one for the money. I hope, because he is, he really is, the major hope of science fiction at this time.

And we come, finally, to *Science Fiction, Fantasy & Horror: 1984*. This is the book designed to bridge the gap between Contento's two early volumes, covering the field to 1983, and the Locus Press series, covering thus far, 1985-1988.

For those of you who have to have an Index, no finer example exists or is liable to. In addition to the listings, which cross each other in various ways, there is the Locus-supplied annual wrapup of everything under the sun that could possibly relate to the main title. Heartily recommended, I hope these books never stop.

Books to Look For

BY ORSON SCOTT CARD

Second Contact, Mike Resnick,
(TOR, cloth, 288pp, \$17.95)

MIKE RESNICK has done major, substantial work during his career. He has also done wonderfully mindless fluff.

This book is somewhere in between. It isn't going to change your life, but you're probably going to have a good time reading it. It's a sure thing that Resnick had a good time *writing* it.

The story begins with a lawyer who is forced to take on the case of a

spaceship commander who cold-bloodedly murdered two of his crew members. There's no doubt that he did it, and the lawyer is expected to plead his client guilty but crazy. Instead, he finds himself believing his client's story that the two guys he killed were actually aliens in disguise, coming to Earth to resume a conflict that they had lost the first time around.

What follows is a fairly standard find-the-truth-before-they-kill-me thriller, but the truth he discovers at the end is interesting, maybe even surprising, and the adventures along the way are, well, adventurous. Resnick can do this sort of thing in his sleep, and it works. *Maybe* I could have put it down unfinished, but I didn't think to try.

I didn't ask the book to be *War and Peace*, so I wasn't disappointed when it turned out not to be. I was a bit disappointed, though, that Resnick seemed content to end the book with the lawyer buying into the system that had been trying to kill him. Not that this is implausible *per se*; but he seemed awfully callous about the innocent bystanders who got blown up in one of the failed attempts to kill the hero. Since the killing of innocents was *not* essential to the plot, and since the complete disregard of their deaths made a moral mockery of the ending, I wish Resnick had noticed this flaw and

performed some corrective surgery. It left me with a bad taste in my mouth. And that definitely *isn't* the result Resnick meant to achieve.

Freemaster, Kris Jensen, (DAW, paper, 285pp, \$4.95)

This is the kind of book that made me a science fiction reader when I was in junior high. The situation is traditional: A human trade representative is trying to work out a treaty with an alien community, while an illegal spy from a ruthless corporation is trying to subvert the process and supplant her, no matter how many aliens might have to die along the way.

Jensen is a clear, clean writer — the story is told with vigor, and unless you are determined not to connect with the book, it provides interesting ideas, emotional climaxes, plenty of suspense, and the vision of strangeness that all speculative literature must supply.

So why does it remind me of books I read as a kid? Not because Jensen is deliberately writing adolescent literature — that is certainly *not* the case. I think it's because the book is so traditional that, while it never descended into cliché, it also never surprised me. I suppose after reading a few thousand sf stories and novels over the years, I've become too jaded to read such a traditional

piece with real excitement. Enjoyment, yes, but my fingers didn't exactly sweat as I turned the pages.

That's my problem, not the book's. A more naive reader — an adolescent, or someone else who's new to the genre — won't have the shadows of a thousand similar tales constantly intruding as he reads. The alien pattern of reproduction will seem to such a reader to be marvelously fresh and exciting and new. The outcome of the struggle for the soul of a world won't seem such a foregone conclusion to that reader. And, in fact, Jensen is a good enough writer that I did *enjoy* all these elements.

I guess this is all just a way to get around to saying: I think that for many readers, *Freemaster* will be a wonderful book. For some readers, it might even be that treasured book that first opened to them the world of science fiction. You're not going to see it on any award ballots, because

awards are generally voted by people who have read too much for this book to blow them away. I might even be the only reviewer in a major magazine to mention it.

And that's a shame. Because I daresay that, given a chance, *Freemaster* might actually give more pleasure to more people than a lot of the books that will be the toast of the sf in-crowd this year.

Maybe you're as jaded as I am. But I'll bet you know somebody who isn't. Maybe a teenage girl or boy — your own kid, a niece or nephew, a grandchild, a neighbor, a student — who you think might have that inner spark that would make them part of the natural audience for speculative fiction. The old Heinlein or Norton juveniles might be a bit too old-fashioned for this particular kid. So what book do you give?

This one would do. It would do very well.



This is Sheri Tepper's first F&SF story, but she is well known for her excellent novels, most recently GRASS and the upcoming RAISING THE STONES (Doubleday). The author writes that she was born and reared on a farm in rural Colorado. She worked for years as the director of a health agency in Denver, retiring from that position in the early 1980s to return to rural life in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains, where she raises breed livestock and writes fantasy and science fiction.

The Gazebo

By Sheri S. Tepper

TEATIME WAS THE only really good part of the day, so far as Carol was concerned. She almost always had her tea in the gazebo, sometimes with Martha or Lucky or Ben, if any of them happened to be around. It had become quite a family tradition, except when it was too windy to sit outside, which was too often to suit Carol. One day while she was supposed to be grocery shopping (Maxine was at the house, baby-sitting), Carol slipped away to the hardware store and bought some big sheets of extra-heavy clear plastic. She worked away for the next few afternoons, stapling the sheets inside the latticework of the gazebo and fastening them down with long pieces of batten she scrounged from her carpenter neighbor. Though it was a lot of work, she felt she had to get out of the house for a few minutes every day, even if out was only a few yards away. She needed a separate place, one where she couldn't hear Billy-Boy or Sweet-Sue for a little while. Once the plastic was up, shutting out the wind, there were very few days she couldn't sit in the gazebo, savoring the

out-of-doors and smelling the herbal or citrus tang of the tea she kept hot over a little candle warmer. Her grown-up son and daughters showed up whenever they could. Sometimes Carol even made gingersnaps, if she had time or energy left.

Not that there was ever much of either. Billy-Boy and Sweet-Sue took so much time, even at night, that the days swam by in a fog of exhaustion, with nothing much getting done and no hope of catching up. Except for teatime. Carol always made time for that. Even if she hadn't had a minute to herself all day, at teatime she put the babies in their room and gave them something to play with and told herself not to pay any attention if they cried. She had to have a break. If it weren't for the sweet normalcy of Marty and Lucky and Ben. . . . Well, if it weren't for them, she'd pack it in, she told herself. That was a British expression she'd read somewhere. She had no idea whether she was using it correctly, but it sounded right. If it weren't for teatime, she'd pack it in.

Not that Richard understood that.

"You'd get more done if you didn't lollygag around out there every afternoon," he said. "A lot more done. Like laundry, for example."

Richard couldn't understand where her days went. Of course, Richard got away from the house every day. Richard went to the office. Richard didn't come home until suppertime, or sometimes not until bedtime, or sometimes not at all. Richard went out of town on business. It wasn't Richard getting up all night with Billy-Boy and Sweet-Sue. When he went to bed, Richard slept like . . . well, Richard slept like a log. He got a little half-smile on his face, and he breathed easily through his nose, and once he pulled the covers up to his chin, he never moved. You could set off a cannon next to his ear, and he wouldn't budge. Sometimes when Carol got up in the night for the second or third time to check the babies or check the doors, she'd look at him in disbelief, lying there in his bed across from hers, so neat and orderly, never sprawling or tangled up in the sheets, never moving when Billy-Boy yelled or Sue screamed.

He didn't hear the children during the night. And he didn't see them much in the daytime, either. They were always in bed by the time he got home, and he always left before they got up. The only time he saw them was when they were dressed to go to church on Sundays, with Billy-Boy neatly done up in a fresh shirt and trousers, and Sweet-Sue in one of her little dresses, all ruffles that Carol had stayed up late to iron. Even then he

only sort of half-saw them, checking them out, to see if they were presentable. Of course, once they got to church, Carol stayed with the children in the church nursery while Richard went to services. Richard was a deacon. He had to be there, so the family had to be there, too.

Unfortunately, Carol said to herself, the service was piped into the nursery, so the baby-sitters couldn't miss anything. Not the sermon or the effusions afterward.

"Richard Morrison, you're a saint to provide for these dear children, a real saint." Richard always got a silly look on his face when someone said that, a kind of fox-in-the-henhouse, egg-sucking grin. Someone was sure to say it, every Sunday. If it wasn't Reverend Payson or his wife, it was one of the other deacons or one of their wives, or somebody else. "Richard Morrison, you're a saint."

Then they'd remember she was there, and say, "And you, too, Carol, of course." Funny how they never started out with her as the saint. Not that she was sure she wanted to be a saint. She wasn't even sure what a saint was supposed to be, though her grandmother had had a picture in her dining room that had something to do with saints. The picture was of lions getting ready to eat Christians, and both the lions and the Christians had had that same egg-sucking expression on their faces.

Maybe Richard should be the saint, because it had been his idea about the children.

"You're alone here all day," he'd said. "Without much to do, and the home in Texas has all these children. . . ."

She hadn't paid much attention when he said it. Even before they were married, Richard was one to get ideas from time to time. About going to Africa and working in a native hospital. About going to Brazil and bringing God to the Indians along the Amazon, or to some strange, tooth-sharpened tribe in the mountains of the Philippines. About working with drug-dependent youngsters in the ghetto, or saving Satanists. Television evangelists sometimes got him started. Or programs at the church, when missionaries came back and told about famine or refugees or saving souls. Whatever it was, Richard would talk about it for hours. He would buy books about the place, wherever it was, or the project, whatever it was, and he would make a lot of phone calls, finding out all about it. He would get red and excited, and then, after a while, something else would come along he thought he should do, or they should do.

Carol blamed herself for not paying enough attention. Even though she listened and commented, so she could share his interests — it was important to share a husband's interests — she never really focused on what he was saying. Maybe that was because he never really *asked* her about anything. Any more than he had asked her before he bought this huge old house it was impossible to keep clean, or before he joined the church, or anything else he felt like doing. Richard didn't ask his helpmeet. That was one of Richard's favorite words. Helpmeet. A helpmeet sort of went along. Carol told herself sometimes she'd rather be a wife, because, she assumed, wives got asked, but she'd never broached the matter with Richard.

And then, after Billy-Boy and Sweet-Sue arrived, it was too late to broach anything. There they were, nine o'clock on a Wednesday night, both of them hungry and crying and filthy, after eight hours in the car that had brought them from the church home in Texas. Richard hadn't told her they were coming. Carol thought at the time he might simply have forgotten all about them. There was no milk in the house, and of course nothing like disposable diapers, which they both still used. No cribs. No rubber sheets for the beds. Nothing. They had to have cribs, because they wouldn't stay in a bed. And they had to have rubber sheets. And all Richard did was say over and over, in that hearty voice of his, "That's fine. We'll manage. We'll manage."

They did manage that first night, but only just. Richard simply slept through it. For Carol, it was a sort of nightmare, with the children howling like animals until almost dawn. Thursdays were Carol's regular days to volunteer at the blood bank while Maxine gave the house a once-over, but that day, Carol had Maxine stay with the sleeping children while she went by the blood bank, explaining she couldn't stay, and then on to the mall to buy the things they had to have. Even after she got home, she kept thinking of things and adding them to the list and sending Maxine back to get other things on Richard's credit card. Even so, it was days before she had everything she needed.

It wasn't an adoption. If it had been an adoption, there would have been social workers and investigators and people checking up. If it had been an adoption, someone would have made sure they had beds for the children, and clothing and a pediatrician lined up, all the necessities. But since it was a church home fostering children among its members, they didn't engage in formalities. That's what the haggard-looking woman said who

brought the children. We don't engage in formalities. Carol wondered at the time if it would have been too much of a formality just to let her know they were coming. Later she found out it was at the deacons' meeting the week before that Richard had volunteered to take the children. Someone had come from the home to make an appeal, and Richard had said, I'll take two of those children. Just like that. Like he was ordering rolls at the bakery. I'll take two of those croissants. Without asking her. Just the way he'd volunteered her services at the blood bank on Thursdays, without asking her.

Of course, in both cases he'd talked about it for a while, and she hadn't said no, so maybe he figured he didn't need to ask. Didn't need to ask if she had Thursdays free or whether he should take two children. Even though it wasn't really Richard who did the taking.

"Mama, how could you just go along!" That was Martha, trim and pretty in her new brown suit, stopping off for tea on her way home from her library job. "How could you?"

Carol could never explain to Martha. Martha was so definite, so firm. Martha decided what was right, and then did it. Martha even talked back to her boss, telling him what was right.

Lucky shushed her sister. "Marty, you know Mom. Now, come on. You know very well she couldn't stand up to Richard! Who can? You know Richard."

They all knew Richard. They had said, on more than one occasion, that marrying Richard had not been the smartest thing Mom had ever done. Carol never argued with them. They were only saying what she sometimes thought of herself. Richard didn't need her to defend him. He did fine, all by himself. Richard was a saint.

"Saint!" Ben snorted. "Not my idea of one. Come on, Mom. Has Richard ever even bathed Billy-Boy? Or dressed him?"

Richard hadn't, of course. But then, Richard was very busy making the money to support them all. And he did support them all, very well. Carol couldn't argue with that. There was never any argument about the house-keeping money. All she had to do was tell him what she needed, and he gave her the money for it or gave her his credit card and told her how much she could spend. He let her get whatever she needed. Except a housekeeper. With her home all day, Richard said they didn't need a housekeeper. He had relented, though, and let her have Maxine for a

few more hours every week so Carol could get the shopping done. There was no way any human person could get through the supermarket without a major disaster with either Billy-Boy or Sweet-Sue along. Sweet-Sue screamed whenever something set her off, and all kinds of things could set her off. They weren't little-girl screams, either, but high, shrill animal shrieks that sounded like somebody being killed. And Billy was simply too big for her to control. For an eight-year-old, he was very big, and he grabbed other children sometimes, and bit them, and parents got angry at that. After the first couple of times trying to shop with Billy-Boy and Sweet-Sue along, Carol had simply given Richard the list and asked him to do it on the way home. A few sessions at the market, and he'd decided to let her have Maxine.

"I wish I could do more!" Lucky said. Lucky was in her senior year at the university, and she was up to her ears in studies and activities and editing the paper and taking part in clubs. Even when she came by for tea, she could never stay very long because there was always some article or editorial to write, some assignment she had to do by the next day. Carol shook her head sometimes, wondering how Lucky managed to get everything done.

"You're the one we wonder about," Lucky said, hugging Carol tightly. "Talk about getting everything done! How many times were you up last night?"

Carol shrugged, flushing a little. It had been the usual, she said. Three or four times. Maybe five. "Sweet-Sue cries when she wets herself," she explained. "And that wakes up Billy-Boy. I tried putting them in separate rooms, but that just made them yell louder. I wish Sue wouldn't wake up like that. It's hard to get her back to sleep, and hearing her cry makes Billy angry."

Of course, most things made him angry. Billy-Boy was a very angry little boy, a hitter, a tantrum thrower. It wasn't as though you could talk to him, either, because he really didn't understand. All you could do was wrestle him until he stopped kicking and hitting and biting his tongue or anything else he could reach. He could fasten his teeth into you like a little terrier, though he'd pretty much stopped biting Carol. And every week that went by, he kept getting bigger and stronger. The woman from the home had said they were Down's syndrome children. Carol had always thought Down's syndrome children were sweet and childlike

and biddable. Perhaps some of them were, but not Billy or Sweet-Sue. Of course, Billy and Sue had other problems. Carol tried to remember that whenever she looked at herself in the mirror after her shower and noticed new bruises or bite marks on her legs or body or arms. Billy and Sue had other problems, poor babies.

"You could leave Richard, you know." That was Ben. "Mom, you could come live with me."

But of course she couldn't. Wouldn't. Mothers shouldn't do that to their sons. Not even to successful, loving sons who made the offer.

"They need love," she said, meaning Billy and Sweet-Sue. Richard often talked about the miracle of love. Sad and fruitless lives could be changed by the miracle of love. It didn't matter who the parents had been or how terrible the environment — the child could be transformed by love. Whenever Richard went on like that, it made Carol feel inadequate. The children's lives weren't being changed, and that must mean she wasn't loving them enough.

"Why should you love them at all?" Lucky asked angrily. "I don't see it, Mom. I don't see why you have to love them at all."

Which is another thing Carol asked herself from time to time. Why did she have to love them at all?

"Because it's the Christian thing to do," Richard said. "We love them because it's the Christian thing to do." He hadn't said it to her, but to someone at the church who had asked. Since then, she'd said it to herself, almost hourly. It's the Christian thing to do. Though, when she really thought about it, it didn't seem more Christian than maybe Jewish or even Moslem or Hindu. After all, the church home the kids had come from didn't take just anybody. They took children only from members of the church. *The mothers who had put them in the home in the first place had been Christians, members of the church, and not only members but missionaries* — so the haggard woman had said. You'd think if anybody could have had enough love, it would have been them, but they hadn't had enough, not even for their own children. They'd given them up! Relinquished them!

"Richard says loving them is the Christian thing to do," Carol told her children.

"If people weren't patting Richard on the back all the time, he wouldn't be such a phony," said Martha. Martha was the outspoken one. "Richard just likes applause."

"Shh," Carol said, flushing. "Shhh, Marty. Your talking like that just makes life difficult."

And Martha had the grace to blush and say she was sorry; she hadn't meant to make life difficult. "We shouldn't come over here all the time, talking heresy and taking up your time, Mom."

Martha didn't really mean that. She laughed when she said it. They knew as well as Carol did that it was only their coming over for a few minutes in the afternoon that kept her sane. She understood their not wanting to come when Richard was around. Richard had made it very clear he didn't want any comparisons between her current and former life. Sometimes she thought he was jealous of Martha and Lucky and Ben. Richard had told her he couldn't have any children of his own. Even if he could have fathered children, she had been too old to start a family when they were married. Women in their late forties had no business having babies. Look at Billy-Boy and Sweet-Sue. Both their mothers had been older mothers — so the woman who had brought them had said. "Risky," she had said, looking at Carol with a funny expression on her face. "Risky, having children at that age."

"They should have had abortions," Carol had blurted one morning after she'd been up four or five times in the night, changed the babies' beds twice, and been badly bitten. It was one of those nights when Billy-Boy forgot about not biting her until he'd done it. Carol was standing at the stove, trying to fix Richard's breakfast and bandage her wrist at the same time. "They can tell when women are going to have babies like this! They should have had abortions!"

She knew better than to say that to Richard. Afterward she couldn't think why she'd said it except that her arm hurt so and she was so foggy and tired. She should have kept her mouth shut, because Richard sent Reverend Payson and Mrs. Payson and two of the deacons over to pray with her that day, and all it did was keep her from getting the vacuuming done and the shopping done, and then Richard stormed out in a rage because supper wasn't ready when he got home.

"Come live with me, Mom," urged Ben. And oh, she was tempted.

"You'd get more done if you didn't lollygag around out there," said Richard. He knew perfectly well it was the only time she had to be with her children. The fact was, he resented her children. Carol sometimes thought that's why he'd agreed to take Billy-Boy and Sweet-Sue. Because

it would leave her no time at all for her own kids.

Not that they needed time. They didn't. They were grown and successful and didn't need her at all. They weren't married. That's the only thing she worried about sometimes. Whether they would marry the right kind of person or would make a mistake. Of course, according to Reverend Payson, people didn't make mistakes. People made holy contracts with one another, and then trouble came along to try their faith. That didn't mean it was a mistake. Good people just dug in their heels and worked harder at it, that's all.

She just had to dig in her heels and work harder at it.

Marty and Lucky and Ben always left by 5:10 or 5:15. Tonight was Thursday — no church meeting tonight, no sales meeting, so Richard would be home around 7:30, expecting supper no later than 8:00. That meant she had to get the children bathed by 6:00, and fed by 6:30, so they'd have a chance to fall asleep by the time Richard got home. They usually slept really well for the first four or five hours, and by that time, Richard was asleep himself, so it all worked out.

The easiest way to bathe Billy-Boy was to get in the shower with him. Richard thought it wasn't decent for Billy to see her naked, so she always wore a bathing suit. That way she could soap him while he jumped up and down and yelled, and if she was lucky, she could get his rubber pants on him without his having an accident. Then he'd usually be contented to play for a few minutes on the floor while she bathed Sue. Sue hated the shower, so she had to be done in the bathtub, in only a tiny bit of water, or else she screamed. Then Carol fed them both, still in the bathroom, with them still almost naked and her still in her bathing suit — Richard didn't know that, but what he didn't know wouldn't hurt him. Both of them spit their food and threw their food and smeared their food, and it was easier to clean them up if they weren't wearing anything, and easier to clean up the bathroom than any other room in the house. She wore her bathing suit while she fed them, because it saved laundry. After she put them into pj's and into their oversized cribs, with the high-sides fastened tightly so they couldn't climb out, she had time to mop up the bathroom and take a shower before she got dressed and fixed Richard's supper. This was the schedule.

Of course, it didn't always work. Sometimes Billy-Boy messed himself over and over, screaming and clawing and biting at her. Sometimes Sue

wouldn't stop screaming. Sometimes they didn't want their dinner and only howled for their bottles. And sometimes Carol just locked them in their room and cried for an hour, which didn't do anyone any good.

But tonight everything went right. Both of them ate most of their suppers and then settled down with their special bottles beside them in the bed, for later. Richard said they were far too old for bottles, but bottles kept them quiet. She didn't know how she'd explain, if Richard ever decided to go in and have a look at the children. Not that he ever had, but he might.

She'd planned pot roast for supper. She'd even cooked the meat for an hour this morning, so it would be done on time. Now she added tomatoes and chopped bell pepper and onion to the gravy, and put the covered baking dish back into the oven before peeling the potatoes and putting them on to boil. Mashed potatoes, mushy green beans, and a molded salad. Carol hated jellied salads, but Richard's mother had always made them. Tonight it would be chopped celery and cabbage and carrots, set in a hurry with ice cubes. Thank God for ice cubes. And for Miracle Whip. Carol didn't like Miracle Whip, either, but that's what Richard was used to. He'd eat anything if it had Miracle Whip on it. It always tasted sort of like vinegar-flavored library paste to Carol, but Richard complained if she bought mayonnaise. Or butter. Or real cream for her coffee. Funny how different people could be. Richard didn't like mayonnaise, or sour cream, or the flavor or smell of anything pungent like garlic or pepper. Carol loved garlic, and red chilies. She had strings of garlic and red chilies hanging out in the gazebo where the smell wouldn't bother Richard, and she always had something really spicy for lunch when Richard was at work.

Even with that, she knew she wasn't eating enough.

"You've lost a lot of weight, Mom!" That had been Ben, last week.

"I suppose I have," she'd confessed. It was true. The bathroom scales said she'd lost almost fifteen pounds. She was so tired all the time. Too tired to eat. And, except for her spicy lunches, everything she cooked for Richard tasted like paste.

When Richard got home at 7:30, dinner was ready to go on the table. He liked that. "Hungry men like their dinner on the table," he said. "Not like those liberals who sit around drinking their meals, spending other folks' money." Carol had never quite figured out why it was always

liberals who sat around drinking before supper. Richard's boss was a Republican, and according to Richard, he was half-soused most of the time. That was different, though. Somehow.

He ate his way steadily through the mashed potatoes and pot-roast gravy, through the meat, the vegetables, the salad. She had pie for dessert, and he ate his way through that, too, munching steadily, without talking. Carol sat there, opposite him, sort of playing with her food. It seemed to stick partway down, and the best she could manage was a forkful or two of mashed potatoes and gravy doused with a little seasoning powder she kept at her place.

"Kids O.K.?" he asked when he'd finished.

"Yes," she said. "Fine."

"Talking to Reverend Payson today," he said. "He was asking if we could take another child."

Everything whirled a little, and she gripped the edge of the table. "No," she said.

"Yes, he really did," said Richard, with that egg-sucking grin.

"I mean, no, we can't," she whispered. "No, we really can't. I've got all I can handle."

"I don't see why," he said in an irritated voice. "You have nothing to do all day but take care of the children. And you've got Maxine coming three times a week. She does the housework."

Maxine *didn't* do the housework. One time a week, she baby-sat half a day while Carol volunteered at the blood bank. Two times a week, she baby-sat for an hour and a half while Carol went to the market. Nobody could do housework and take care of the children at the same time. Carol had tried to tell Richard that, but he didn't listen.

"I told him we'd consider it," said Richard.

"No," she said again. "I can't. I'm not well."

"What do you mean, you're not well?"

"I'm . . . I'm not well, Richard. I've been losing weight."

"You could stand to lose some. You were getting really flabby there for a while."

She blushed. It was true. She had been getting flabby. Not that Richard really knew. They didn't sleep in the same bed, or anything like that. And they were careful not to invade one another's privacy in the bathroom.

"I'm not looking for sex," he'd told her when he asked her to marry him. "At my age, I don't need that. I'm looking for a helpmeet."

She hadn't realized quite what a helpmeet was. A helpmeet was a cook, mostly. And a laundress. And someone to do the shopping. What had she been looking for? Someone to share with? Someone to fill her loneliness? She couldn't remember. She had to have had a reason for marrying Richard; she just couldn't remember what it had been.

Martha said, "You didn't need to marry him, Mom! For heaven's sake!"

Martha was right. Carol hadn't needed to. Except, everything was so same all the time. Her poky little apartment. The library with its library paycheck and eventual library pension. Shopping for groceries, then going home again to put them away. Scrambled eggs for supper in front of the TV. Movies on the weekend. A phone call from her brother in Topeka, once a month or so. The kids must have all been very busy back then, because she couldn't remember seeing much of them at the time, either. Marrying Richard had promised a change. She hadn't thought about having children. When a man told you right out he didn't want sex, somehow you didn't think about children. And who would ever think about children like Billy-Boy and Sweet-Sue.

"Not until I've seen the doctor," she said now, stubbornly. "I need to find out whether I'm well enough."

He scowled at her without saying anything. Richard didn't like to be crossed. He really didn't.

Still, now that she'd said she was going to the doctor, it seemed like a good idea.

"You're anemic," the physician said. "What're these bruises?"

She explained about the children, and the doctor grimaced. "You're trying to care for two retarded children, one of whom is sizable and violent, twenty-four hours a day, by yourself?"

"He's only eight," she said, thinking that Billy-Boy seemed a lot bigger than eight, somehow.

"Where did these children come from?"

Carol explained about the church home. "Some of them are the children of missionaries," she explained. "I guess they were older women. Older women have Down's syndrome children, don't they?"

"They have them more often, yes. But there are tests, you know! Women don't have to have Down's syndrome children!"

"Our church doesn't believe in abortions."

He snorted and glared at her as though he were angry at her. "Or birth control, either, obviously. Well, maybe you'll be able to cope better if we cure this anemia. I'm giving you some vitamins and iron, lots of iron. This may upset your stomach or your bowels, but you've got to eat. You're entirely too thin. I want to see you again in a month."

"My husband wants us to take another child," she murmured, fingering the little gold cross at her neck. "I told him I had to see if I'm well enough first."

"Another child like the ones you've got?"

"I guess so, yes."

"Tell him no," said the doctor, giving her an angry look. "Tell him absolutely no. Tell him to call me."

She told Richard, and Richard did call the doctor, returning from the phone with a red face and pursed mouth. "He says he may have to put you in the hospital. Who the hell's going to take care of the kids if you're in the hospital?"

She felt like saying, Why you, Richard; you're the saint — but she didn't. "It won't come to that," she soothed. "He says I have to put a little weight on, that's all. I'm anemic."

"I thought you were looking pale, Mom," said Ben. "Are you remembering to take the medicine?"

And she nodded and said, yes, she was. She did remember, most of the time.

"Don't get sick, Mom," said Lucky. "We need you."

Reverend Payson made a call, to ask her how she felt. "You know, when you get to feeling better, Carol, we really need a home for another child. . . ."

"My doctor says no," she smiled. It was nice to have a doctor who would say no. "Since you and Mrs. Payson don't have any children at home, maybe you could take the child. Or, if I do go to the hospital, maybe Mrs. Payson could come over every day and stay with the children while Richard is at work."

Reverend Payson left rather suddenly after that, and Carol didn't hear any more about it. She took her medicine, and after a few weeks, she got so she could actually sleep through several hours of the night without getting up. The iron did upset her a little, but she began to feel

stronger, and her bruises and bites healed up.

"You're looking better, Mom," said Ben.

Evidently, Richard thought so, too. A few weeks later, Carol came home from the blood bank on Thursday and found all the plastic ripped out of the gazebo, and a contractor there, measuring the lattice panels.

"What're you doing?" she cried.

"Measuring this here gaze-bo," he said. "Your husband sold her to me. I'm taking her apart and moving her over on Grove Street. Nice Victorian gaze-bo like this, it belongs in a nice garden where people can see it."

"But it was mine!" she cried.

"Hey, lady, I don't know from nothing." He shook his head at her warningly. "All I know is, the man here sold it to me, and I'm taking it away in the truck tomorrow."

"Richard, the gazebo's mine," she cried when he came home.

"The house and this property is in my name, all of it," he said stiffly. "The only things you own, so far as I know, are your junker of a car and that piddling little annuity your father left you and the clothes on your back. You don't own that gazebo. You've been spending far too much time out there. Wearing yourself out. Making yourself sick."

"But that's where . . . where. . . ." She choked to a stop, seeing the expression on his face.

"Don't say it," he commanded. "Don't say one word. You will not talk about that."

He meant Martha, and Lucky, and Ben. He didn't want to hear about them. He glowered at her over his supper plate, and she sat stupefied in front of hers. How could he? How could he?

While she was doing the dishes, she heard him on the phone. "Well, she's a little upset, Reverend, but she'll get over it. No, I think a dose of reality is a good thing. She spent far too much time out there talking about those imaginary children of hers."

So he'd been talking about her behind her back. Saying what he'd always said, of course. That her children were imaginary. Lucky, and Martha, and Ben, imaginary. She'd never had any children, he said. She was a fanciful spinster who had worked in a library and never had any children. Now she had real children to take care of, which ought to be enough. Any other children were dreamed up, that's all. The same thing he'd said when she'd tried to tell what taking care of Billy-Boy and Sweet-Sue was

really like. "You're imagining things," he'd said in that superior way of his. "You live in a dreamworld."

She felt the tears slip down her cheeks, saw them fall into the dish-water. Outside the kitchen window, the skeleton of the gazebo showed stark against the evening sky. All the side panels were down, and only the posts were left.

She slipped outside to stand next to a bare turned post, stroking it, her feet scuffling against something in the dust. Her garlic strings. Her chili *ristras*. Thrown down on the plastic, like trash. She gathered them up and took them into the garage, into the little storeroom where she kept suitcases and her parents' things in the old trunk, and her own old sleeping bag, from when she was young and used to go camping, hanging on the wall. She hung her garlic chains and chili *ristras* up next to the sleeping bag, then leaned her head against the wall, smelling the pungency of them, crying.

When she went back into the house, she found Richard in the living room. "I loved that gazebo," she said to him from the doorway. "I loved it. I can't understand why you did that."

"Because you were wasting time out there," he said, looking up from his paper with his calm, superior smile. "I told Reverend Payson we'd take another child, and he and Mrs. Payson drove down to Texas today. They'll pick up the child tomorrow morning and drop it off here, probably tomorrow afternoon. With another child, you should be so fully occupied you'll have no time to spend in imaginary pursuits."

The fog was all around her, blinding her. "But my doctor. . . ."

"Your doctor isn't the head of this family," he said. "I am."

He is, she told herself as she went back to the kitchen, feeling her way blindly along the wall. Yes. Richard really is the head of this family. It's time I let Richard be the head of this family.

He came to the kitchen door later, to tell her it was time for bed, but she was cleaning out the refrigerator, and told him she'd be up when she finished. She hadn't cleaned the refrigerator in weeks, and besides, there was some stuff in there she'd brought home this morning that she wanted to dispose of. She dumped it down the garbage disposal, running the water for a long time, and she burned the plastic containers in the living room fireplace. Or melted them, rather. When they were melted, she scraped up the goo and buried it at the bottom of the trash can. There was no point

in leaving stuff around for Richard to get upset about.

When she finally went upstairs, carrying a suitcase from the garage, Richard was asleep. She packed most of her things, leaving some, so it wouldn't look like she'd walked out. She'd never had many clothes, so it didn't take long. Her savings book and her annuity records were in the top drawer. She took them, leaving her wedding ring in their place. She'd saved several hundred dollars from the household money, and she took almost all of that. She had earned it, and it would be enough.

Then she went to the babies' room and took the key out of their bedroom door, the one she always locked at night, and put it in her coat pocket. She let down the sides of their cribs. She took their bottles to the bathroom and emptied them into the sink, then washed them out, wiping up the bright spots with toilet tissue and flushing it away before she buried the clean bottles and nipples under the towels, at the back of the linen closet. Richard felt the children were too old for bottles, and he was probably right.

When she carried her suitcase downstairs, the children were already beginning to move about restlessly. Outside the back door, she saw Ben, standing by the driveway, looking at the skeleton of the gazebo.

"That wasn't a nice thing for him to do," he said. "You should never have married Richard, Mom."

"I know," she said.

"The children are going to wake up, and you'll be gone," he said.

"I know," she said again. "Excuse me, Ben, I have to get something out of the storeroom." He followed her as she went in and turned on the light. "I thought I'd take my sleeping bag and sleep in the car tonight," she said, brushing dust off the rolled-up bag. "Somewhere along the road. In one of those rest areas west of here. What do you think?"

"Seems like a good idea," he admitted. "Sounds like fun, in fact."

She carried the sleeping bag out to the car. "I left some of my stuff here. I figure if there's some doubt that I've gone, nobody will look very hard, you know?"

He nodded, and she patted his cheek.

"You go on home now," she told him. "Tell Martha and Lucky I'm sorry not to have taken time to say good-bye, but I'll send you all postcards." She waved to him as she pulled out of the driveway and turned down the street toward the highway. While she was cleaning out the refrigerator,

she'd decided on California, or maybe Arizona. Someplace warm. Some place inexpensive, adults-only retirement center, maybe. Her little annuity wasn't much — Richard had been right about that — but she'd get a part-time job and make out fine.

At the corner she stopped for the signal, looking up at the steeple clock in the church. Midnight. About now Billy-Boy and Sweet-Sue would be waking up and reaching for their bottles. No matter how much ordinary food she got down them during the day, the children were always starving by midnight. Nothing satisfied them but their bottles. Well, the bottles were gone. The sides of the cribs were down; the door was unlocked. They'd climb out and go hunting, just the way they had the night they'd first arrived. That first night she'd found them halfway down the hallway, Billy-Boy and Sweet-Sue on the prowl, with their hairy little feet and their mad, angry little eyes and their terribly, terribly sharp little teeth — looking for someone who wasn't expecting them.

Luckily for her, Carol had always been a light sleeper. Luckily for her, the babies didn't really like the taste of blood with garlic in it. After the horrible struggle of that first night, she'd always made sure they were locked in, with the crib sides up, with full bottles beside them. Tired and sick as she'd often been, Carol had never missed a week at the blood bank, just so she could keep those bottles filled. That had taken care of the nights, and in the daytime, the babies hadn't been too bad. Comparatively speaking.

Well, she'd done her best for them. She'd dug in her heels and tried very hard, just the way Reverend Payson recommended. She'd been a helpmeet, but with the gazebo gone, she couldn't be one anymore. She was packing it in. Now Richard could be head of the family and do his best. Who knows? As a saint, he might do much better than she had. Maybe Billy-Boy and Sweet-Sue deserved a saint like Richard, who would change their lives with love.

If he woke up in time.





FILMS

HARLAN ELLISON'S WATCHING

Installment 43: *In Which We Lament, "There Goes the Neighborhood!"*

WELL, HELL, you know me: the kind of pain in the ass who gets invited to someone's house for dinner only once. Doesn't like the main course because it's too rare, refuses to eat the vegetables with some dopey *bon mot* like, "That's why I grew up and became an adult . . . so I wouldn't have to eat the green stuff." Gets into a genuinely mean argument with one of the other dinner guests about his politics. Reminds the teen-age daughter of the host about some embarrassing thing she did when she was ten or eleven. Dominates the conversation and makes everyone long for do-it-yourself home crucifixion kits. A real rain cloud kinda guy. The sort you can always count on to rust the Jell-O.

So there I am at this elegant

party that Stan Lee of Marvel Productions threw, back in December of 1987, and his and Joan's home up in the Hollywood Hills was jammed to the walls with the hoi and the polloi, and at one point I'm introduced to these two young guys named Ed Neumeier and Michael Miner, and Stan or somebody says, "These are the guys who wrote *RoboCop*. Didn't you just write a piece on *RoboCop*?"

Well, they knew damned well I'd just written a review of *RoboCop*, and I'd worked it over like a slab of beef jerky, because forty-something minutes into the damned flick, I'd had it up to here with the idiot violence and the low animal steam heat of the audience and the after-the-fact addition of "socially relevant satire" and I'd said, in effect, this is mean widdle kids pulling the wings off butterflies and setting fire to pussycats and nailing spaniels to ironing boards, and frankly Scarlett, this is like a pavane for

perverts . . . so lemme outta here!

And, well, hell, you know me: the kind of pain in the ass who, when he's asked by guests at a party, what did you think of our incredibly successful, extremely popular, critically drooled-over movie that has made us two smartasses real hot tickets in this town, answers as charmingly as a cactus spine in your tongue, "I think they ought to nuke you two until you glow."

Well, not exactly. I didn't *exactly* say that. But Stan and Joan haven't extended a dinner invitation since 1987, so I am driven, lashed if you will, toward the conclusion that I acted in a somewhat less than gilt-edged fashion.

I cannot remember precisely what I *did* say to them, but for those of you tragically bereft of a copy of HARLAN ELLISON'S WATCHING (Underwood-Miller, 514 + xxxvii pp., \$29.95) a volume of antic cinematic wisdom paralleled for sheer urgency and pertinence only by the Magna Carta and the more ribald sections of the Nag Hammadi scriptures — a book absolutely guaranteed not only to lift your spirits, unclog your pores, breathe new vigor into your ethical substructure, and get you laid regularly . . . but it also removes rust, bird doo-doo, and rain-spotting from your car, front bumper to trunk lid,

a showroom shine, in just twenty minutes . . . where the hell was I . . . oh, right: for those of you sans the book or back issues containing my review, here is what I said of the original *RoboCop* movie in this column:

"ROBOCOP (Orion), despite its popularity, is as vicious a piece of wetwork as anything I've encountered in recent memory. Devoid of even the faintest scintilla of compassion or commonsense, it is as low as the foreheads of those members of the screening audience who cheered and laughed at each escalated scene of violence. It is a film about, and intended for, no less than brutes. It is a film that struck me as being made by, and for, savages and ghouls. Written by Edward Neumeier and Michael Miner, and directed by the Dutchman Paul Verhoeven, this is a template for everything rabid and drooling in our culture. That it has been touted — after the fact — as being a 'satirical' film, a 'funny' film, is either ass-covering or a genuine representation of the filmmakers's ethically myopic view of what they've spawned. If the former, it's despicable hypocrisy; if the latter, that's just flat scary." That's what I said in print, and at the party.

Subsequent viewings of the film on videocassette and cable provided me with a more complete picture of

the picture — to the point where I was drenched, immersed, saturated in it. I wanted to discover if I'd "overreacted" by walking out of the film at the point where Neumeier-Miner-Verhoeven paraphrased the assassinations of San Francisco mayor George Moscone and supervisor Harvey Milk (27 November 1987) as a mordantly "amusing" trope to enable a bit of Robo's highly-visual violence.

(Sidebar: that absolutely wonderful, self-serving, sort of doublespeak gibberish, *overreaction*. Whenever the reckless behavior of the self-justifiers calls down on their heads more opprobrium than they bargained for, they indict the accusers with the devastating comeback, "You overreacted!" Those who try to manipulate the audience do so cynically, but they never seem to understand that the aroused mob knows no boundaries of behavior; the mob may very well get *only* as excited as the manipulators wished, providing the cheap-thrill-hungry media with momentary red meat and twitchy ganglia — a few tsk-tsks of outrage from special interest groups, another diatribe by that sterling arbiter of artistic worth, Rev. Donald Wildmon and his American Family Association in Tupelo, Mississippi — or it may get as aroused as a teddy-boy contingent at a Brit soccer match and trash a

theater or write a review that trashes the film. Then comes the affronted bleat of, "You overreacted!" meaning: we didn't gauge just how gross we got, and instead of milking you for some publicity that would push our strip of depraved fiction to greater boxoffice receipts, we actually pissed you off, and you're calling us on it, and we are into medium-high dudgeon in an attempt to cover our idiocy and our asses.

(As with the constantly-used and wholly incorrect construct "side-effects" when talking about medicine [all reactions to a specific drug are *effects*; some may be unexpected or undesirable, but using such specific terms contributes to our suspicion that some members of the AMA may not always know what the hell they're doing, so they dissemble with that *side-effects* bushwah], the manipulators put the weight of rationality on the critical observer who reacted more negatively than served the original duplicitous purpose of the outrageous material. In fact, and simply, one can only *react*. If the intensity of one's reaction contains more heat than the self-serving creator of the work desired, that's too goddam bad, but it ain't *overreaction*.)

The original RoboCop is easier to take on the small screen, and in the relative safety of your own home. Removed from the beast lair

environment into which a multiplex theater is transformed when one of these killing-spree scenarios has its way with an audience of teen trogs and their adult apologists, scaled down in size and sensurround ambience, the cleverness of the Neumeier-Miner splatterpunk overstatement frequently asserts itself; and Verhoeven has a steely eye for ultra-violence (as we can see in *Total Recall*, the most recent film he has directed, but a film I will not be reviewing, don't ask) that *in situ* rivets one's fascination.

So, from down the line, I report back that yes, the original *RoboCop* film has some stuff, and it is likely that my *reaction* — not over, under or wherever, but simply *re* — was only in part due to the actual movie. Nonetheless, I found my perception of the film as a coldblooded exercise in cynical exploitation of violence undiminished.

And so, when I was told by my friend Frank Miller, along about summer two years ago, that he had been signed by our mutual theatrical agent, to script *ROBOCOP 2* (Orion), I received the intelligence with a mixture of delight and trepidation.

Delight. Because Frank Miller (whom I praised in another context in the previous installment of "Watching") is a powerful and original writer; he is a sharp observer of

contemporary society; he demonstrates both a fascination and a revulsion for sociopathic behavior that makes for fresh insights; he has a singular design and visual sense; and I have long felt he is one of those rare individuals whose life and work have the potential for being societally significant. And yes, for those of you who seem to object to my "name-dropping" as something Freud might want to examine, he is a close friend. He and his wife, the talented artist Lynn Varley, are very dear to me and Susan; and I tell you this upfront so there will be no secret agenda that can be used to discredit the opinions expressed here about the film Frank has written. Because. . . .

Trepidation. When Frank got the assignment to script *RoboCop 2* (after a Neumeier-Miner treatment for the sequel had been rejected by Orion), I knew that some day I'd have to review the film, and what if I raved about it? He's my pal, so I must be ass-kissing, right? There are actually corrupt spirits out there who attribute such motives to others. And what if I deplore the film? Will I lose the trust and friendship of a man and an artist I admire at both levels? Budrys wrote a column last year on just this topic: the difficulty of reviewing your friends honestly, and the perils it entails.

So it came to pass that Frank and Lynn invited us to a pre-release screening of *RoboCop 2*, and we sat side-by-side (with Dustin Hoffman half a dozen seats away) (which really is name-dropping, but c'mon gimme a break, we're talking Dustin Hoffman here!) and I watched the one hour and 58 minutes that lay at the end of two years of Frank Miller's labors.

And it may be that I won't be invited back to dinner.

Alex Murphy (Peter Weller) was "top of his class at the Police Academy, devout Irish-Catholic family man, imbued with a fierce sense of duty." He was murdered by thugs in the first film. The locale and time of both movies is Detroit, "near future." Urban violence is pandemic and at a level of intensity that makes what Batman faced in Gotham City seem like the cranky behavior of babies in a sandbox. It's so bad that the city has franchised its peacekeeping needs to the giant cartel OmniConsumer Products, and OCP gathers up what's left of Officer Alex Murphy and implants his brain and neural network in an ultra-hi-tech assault armor body, thus producing not a robot, but a cyborg (so why wasn't he called CyborCop?) And though they believe they've programmed the poor sonofabitch to think of himself only

as "RoboCop, Crime Prevention Unit, O.C.P.," he continues to flash back on the identity of Alex Murphy and Murphy's wife and Murphy's son.

The first film dealt primarily with establishing the vicious future society of Detroit, and of RoboCop's merciless revenge on the gang of amoral punks who slaughtered him.

RoboCop 2 runs the same raw meat through the grinder again. This time Detroit is besieged by a messianic monster named Cain (Tom Noonan, who will be remembered as the serial killer in the Michael Mann film *Manhunter*, adapted from Thomas Harris' novel, *RED DRAGON*). Cain and his cult of leather-stud street trash push a cheap and freefall blow your brains melt your eyeballs dementia furioso drug called *nuke*. And the Detroit cops can't really hobble this psychopathic savior because OCP has cut their salaries by forty percent, has canceled their pensions, and won't even enter into binding arbitration. So the cops are on strike. And we swiftly learn that it's intentional, this disarming of the police apparatus. Because the city owes OCP thirty-seven million dollars, it can't pay, and OCP doesn't *expect* them to pay; because if Detroit defaults, then OCP forecloses on all city assets. In short, OCP manages a raid on the city itself, a gargantuan hos-

tile takeover, and the corporation takes the city private. Then loots it as they would an unproductive grommet factory or woolen mill.

These are the two major themes of the movie. Around and through this scenario wind the subplots of RoboCop being superseded in effectiveness by RoboCop 2, a larger and meaner version of the already-too-triggerquick original; the corporate ladder climbing of an OCP bitch-goddess scientist named Dr. Faxx; Murphy driving his wife-of-a-former-life crazy by hanging around in his metal suit, sneaking peeks at her and son Jimmy, to the point that she is suing OCP because Alex isn't really dead, he's just a "prisoner" in that metal suit; the discovery that to make a bigger, better cyborg unit they have to get the brain of a real pervotwistodevofreako; and attempts by the mayor of Detroit to raise the 37 million that will bail the city out of deep OCP water. Some of these subplots work, some of them haven't held a job in record-memory.

There are two primary set-pieces of unending cornucopial violence — the raid on the *nuke* processing plant and the solo attack on Cain in the old River Rouge sludge plant by Robo, who gets "stripped" and the parts unceremoniously dumped on the sidewalk as his fellow cops trudge the picket line. But these are

just the two *main* panoramic chunks of slaughter. There are at least a dozen other, smaller, scenes of innocents, cops, killers, thugs, hookers, children, *latina* factory workers, and assorted bit-players being savaged and butchered. Within the first five minutes a man is electrocuted by a Magna Volt security system in a car he's trying to steal, his still-smoking body dumped into the parking lot; an old lady wheeling a shopping cart full of tin cans is sideswiped by a car and then she's robbed as she lies in the gutter; the purse-snatcher gets his eye put out by a couple of bimbos in razor-spike heels who re-snatch the purse; a gun shop is blown open by a gang of toughs who shoot the defenseless owner; and a half dozen or so creeps get their chests exploded via Robo's Ronson-thin equalizer. Each death is accompanied by the sound of a shank roast being pummeled with a maul, juicy gobbets of stringy innards and Heinz thick blood doing a JackPollock on the scenery, and stuntmen being yanked into the air son ostensibly by the impact of an explosive round.

No, I'm not going to object to *RoboCop 2* on the grounds that it contains a gratuitous body-count somewhere just shy of a hundred. No objection because, at last, the saturation point of what was begun

with *Bonnie and Clyde* and *The Wild Bunch* in '67 and '69 has been reached. *RoboCop 2*'s bloodbath is, a third of the way through the flick . . . boring. Those aren't human beings getting as perforated as passers-by in a Fearless Fosdick strip; they aren't anydumthing but space-fillers and time-killers. They are just inarticulate shorthand. Commas. Stutters in the plot. The script notes from Director to Stunt Coordinator: give me eleven faceless *vato locos* in this scene, rig them with squibs, we'll blow 'em away in one take.

But it isn't just the stunt extras and day-players who are roundfiled. Patricia Charbonneau, exquisite in *Desert Hearts*, has a few dozen lines, none of which mean anything, and her part never pays off; Nancy Allen, who was the humanizing element in the original film, but who hasn't been allowed to work to the elegant standard she set in *Dressed to Kill* or *The Philadelphia Experiment*, is criminally subjugated to a rambling series of action scenes posing as a storyline, and deafening fusillades of gunfire; Dan O'Herlihy, who can out-thesp ninety percent of the actors working today, even when he's rigged up in anthropoid lizard makeup, as he was in *The Last Starfighter*, is relegated to a few grimacing walk-ons in which he has been directed to play the head of OCP as if he were a demented Lex Luthor;

and a black actor named Willard Pugh is condemned to play Mayor Kuzak, the mayor of Detroit, if you will, as an hysterical, twiddle-brained, prancing queen. (Apart from the utter ludicrousness of the characterization, this is a representation of a black mayor of a major American city that should infuriate blacks and gays alike. It is revolting in its racism, homophobia and shrillness. Shameful!)

And finally what we have in this pointless sequel is yet another *Death Wish* clone, tricked up with some sf extrapolation of inner city crime and degradation, no more startling at this advanced stage of the genre than *Streets of Fire* or *Terminator* or *Escape from New York*. It is murkily directed by Irvin Kershner, who has yet to fulfill the promise he showed at the helm of *The Luck of Ginger Coffey* in 1964. And Frank Miller has had his baptism by fire.

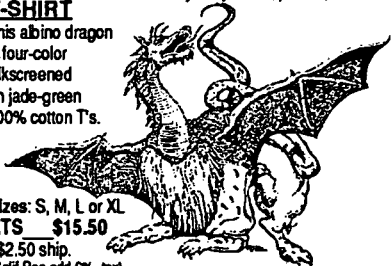
Miller, if I am any judge of screenwriting smarts, has it in him to become a major resource for the American cinema. He needed this credit to get into the game, just to pony up the necessary ante to obtain some clout. But he's seen what they do to a script — such as dropping the brief beat of a scene in which the metal-clad Robo goes to the cemetery to say good-bye to Alex Murphy's grave — a scene ex-



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cised for time-considerations — but a heart beat sacrificed to the glut of butchery scenes because the makers of this film knew it was the nasty boys in the potential audience who had to be fixed again and again to feed their slice'n'dice jones. And he's gotten some mean lessons in the business, up to and including having another writer ride his coat-tails to an onscreen credit. He may not care to spend much of his creative life in a pond this polluted; but if he does, RoboCop 2 will have been a toughening experience.

As for the meaning of this latest entry in the Gunfire Makes for Good Government logbook, it has no more meaning than that to be

found in a quotation from Cicero:

"If we are forced, at every hour, to watch or listen to horrible events, this constant stream of ghastly impressions will deprive even the most delicate among us of all respect for humanity."

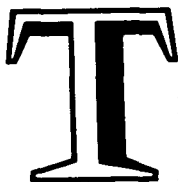
Film is a community. Of creators and aficionados. Product like *RoboCop 2*, transparently intended for the debased and liplicking, only serves to turn the neighborhood into a rundown, seedy, impoverished nightmare of the homeless, the heartless, and the talentless.

The sort of place to which one doesn't even want to be invited for dinner.

One of the interesting things about this story is that it has been in our inventory for some time and was written before the recent revolutionary events in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. So that Bruce Sterling — who has shown his political astuteness in novels such as ISLANDS IN THE NET — proves to be unusually prescient as well as entertaining in this tale about a smuggling operation in the now familiar Soviet province of Azerbaijan.

HOLLYWOOD KREMLIN

By Bruce Sterling



HE ZIL-135 WAS VITAL TO national security. Therefore, it was built only in Russia. It

looked it, too.

The ZIL was a Red Army battlefield truck, with eight monster rubber-lugged wheels and a ten-ton canvas-topped flatbed. This particular ZIL, which had a busted suspension and four burned-out gears, sat in darkness beside a makeshift airstrip. The place stank of kerosene, diesel, tarmac, and the smoke of guttering runway flares. All of it wrapped in the cricket-shrieking night of rural Azerbaijan.

Azerbaijan was a southern Soviet province, with 8 million citizens and thirty-three thousand square miles. Azerbaijan bordered on all kinds of trouble: Iran, Turkey, the highly polluted Caspian Sea, and 3.5 million angry Soviet Armenians.

From within the ZIL's cramped little khaki-colored cab came the crisp beeping of a digital watch.

The driver yanked back the shoddy sleeve of his secondhand Red Army jacket and pressed a watch stud. A dial light glowed, showing thirty seconds from midnight. The driver grinned and mashed more little buttons with his blunt, precise fingers. The watch emitted a twittering Japanese folk tune.

The driver, hanging on to the ZIL's no-power, gut-busting steering wheel, leaned far out the open door and squinted at the horizon. A phantom silhouette slid across the southern stars — a plane without running lights, painted black for night flight.

The driver gulped from a Stolichnaya bottle and lit a Marlboro.

The flare of his Cricket lighter briefly threw his blurred yellow reflection against the ZIL's windshield. He was unshaven, pumpkin-faced, bristle-headed. His eyes were slitted, yet somehow malignantly radiant with preternatural survival instincts. The driver's name was Leggy Starlitz. The locals, who knew no better, called him "Lekhi Starlits."

Starlitz kicked the cab's rusty door open and climbed down the ZIL's iron rungs.

The black plane hit tarmac, bounced drunkenly down the potholed strip, and taxied up. It was a twin-engine Soviet military turboprop, an Ilyushin-14.

Starlitz beckoned at the spyplane with a pair of orange semaphore paddles. He waved it along brusquely. He was not a big fan of the Ilyushin-14.

The IL-14 was already obsolete in the high-tech Soviet Air Force. So the aging planes had been consigned to the puppet Air Force of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan: the DRAAF. This plane had a big Afghan logo clumsily painted over its Soviet red star. The DRAAF logo was a smaller, fatter maroon-colored star, ringed in an inviting target circle of red, green, and black. It looked a lot like a Texaco sign.

Still, the IL-14 was the best spyplane the DRAAF had to offer. It had fine range and speed; it could fly smuggling runs under the Iranian radar, all the way from Kabul to Soviet Azerbaijan.

Starlitz much preferred the DRAAF's antique "Badger" medium bombers. Badgers had good range and superb cargo capacity. You could haul anything in a Badger. Trucks, refugees, chemical feedstocks . . . the works.

It was too bad that the Badger was such a hog to fly. The smugglers had given the Badger up. For months they'd been embezzling tons of kerosene

from the Afghan Air Force fuel dumps. The thievery was becoming too obvious, even for the utterly corrupt Afghan military.

Starlitz guided the creeping, storm-colored plane into the makeshift airstrip's hangar. The hangar was a tin-roofed livestock barn, built to the colossal proportions of a Soviet collective farm. The morale of the collectivized peasants had been lousy, though, and all the cattle had starved to death during the Brezhnev era. Now the barn was free for new restructured uses: something with a lot more initiative, a lot more *up-to-date*.

The plane's engines died, their eighteen cylinders coughing into echoing silence. Starlitz heaved concrete parking blocks under the nosewheels. He propped a paint-stained wooden ladder against the cockpit.

The aircraft's bulletproof canopy creaked up and open. A pilot in an earflapped leather helmet leaned out on one elbow, an oxygen mask dangling from his neck.

"How's it going, ace?" Starlitz said in his foully accented dog Russian.

"Where are the disembarkation stairs?" demanded the pilot. He was Captain Pulat R. Khoklov, a Soviet "adviser" to the DRAAF.

"Huh?" Starlitz said.

Khoklov frowned. "You know very well, Comrade Starlitz. The device that rolls here on wheels, with the proper sturdy metal steps, for my descending."

"Oh. *That*," Starlitz said. "I dunno, man. I guess somebody sold it."

"Where is the rest of your ground crew?" said Captain Khoklov. The handsome young pilot's eyelids were reddened, and his tapered fingertips corpse-pale with Dexedrine. It had been a long flight. The IL-14 was a two-man plane, but Khoklov flew it alone.

Khoklov and his pals didn't trust the DRAAF's native pilots. In 1985 the Afghans had mutinied, and torched twenty of their best MiG fighters, on the ground at Shindand Air Base. Since that incident, most DRAAF missions had been flown by Russian pilots, "unofficially." Pakistani border violations, civilian bombings, a little gas work . . . the sort of mission where DRAAF cover came in handy.

Some DRAAF missions, though, were far more "unofficial" than others.

Starlitz grinned up at the pilot. "The ground crew's on strike, comrade," he said. "Politics. 'The nationalities problem.' You know how it is here in Azerbaijan."

Khoklov was scandalized. "They can't strike against *smugglers*! We're

not the government! We are a criminal private-enterprise operation!"

"They know that, man," Starlitz said. "But they wanted to show solidarity. With their fellow Armenian Christians. Against the Moslem Azerbaijanis."

"You should not have let your Armenian workers go," Khoklov said. "They can't be allowed to run riot just as they please!"

"What the hey," Starlitz said. "Can't *make* 'em work."

"Of course you can," Khoklov said, surprised.

Starlitz shrugged. "Tell it to Gorbachev. . . . Forget the stairs. Use the paint ladder, ace. Nobody's looking."

With reluctance, Khoklov abandoned his dignity. He shrugged out of his harness, set his mask and helmet aside, and clambered down.

Khoklov's DRAAF flight jacket was gaudy with mission patches. Beneath it he sported a civilian Afghan blouse of hand-embroidered paisley, and a white silk ascot. Walkman earphones bracketed his neck. The antique wailing of the Jefferson Airplane rang faintly from the Walkman's foam-padded speakers.

Khoklov stretched and twisted, his spine popping loudly. He walked to the edge of the hangar and peered warily into the darkness, as if suspecting ambush from local unfriendlies. Nothing whatever happened. Khoklov sighed and shook himself. He tiptoed into darkness to relieve himself on the tarmac.

Starlitz coupled the plane's nosewheel to the drawbar of a small diesel tractor.

Khoklov returned. He looked at Starlitz gravely, his poet's face anemic in the hangar's naked overhead lights. "You remained here faithfully, all alone, Comrade Starlitz?"

"Yeah."

"How unusual. You yourself are not Armenian?"

"I'm not religious," Starlitz said. He offered Khoklov a Marlboro.

Khoklov examined the cigarette's brand name, nodded, and accepted a light. "What is your ethnic nationality, Comrade Starlitz? I have often wondered."

"I'm an Uzbek," Starlitz said.

Khoklov thought it over, breathing smoke through his nose. "An Uzbek," he said at last. "I suppose I could believe that, if I really tried."

"My mom was a Kirghiz," Starlitz said glibly. "What's in the plane this time, ace? Good cargo?"

"Excellent cargo," Khoklov said. "But you have no crew to unload it!"

"I can handle it all myself." Starlitz pointed overhead. "I rigged some pulleys. And I just tuned up the forklift. I can improvise, ace, no problem."

"But that isn't permitted," Khoklov said. "One individual can't replace a team, through some private whim of his own! The entire work team is at fault. They must all be disciplined. Otherwise there will be recurrences of this irresponsible behavior."

"Big deal," Starlitz said, setting to work. "The job gets done anyway. The system is functional, ace. So who cares?"

"With such an incorrect attitude from their team leader, no wonder things have come to grief here," Khoklov observed. "You had better work like a Hero of Labor, comrade. Otherwise it will delay my return to base." Khoklov scowled. "And that would be hard to explain."

"Can't have that," Starlitz said lazily. "You might get transferred to Siberia or something. Not much fun, ace."

"I've already been to Siberia, and there is plenty of fun," Khoklov said. "We scramble every day against Yankee spyplanes. . . . And Korean airliners. If there's a difference." He shrugged.

Starlitz moved the ladder down the plane's fuselage, past a long, spiky row of embedded ELINT antennas. He propped the ladder beside a radome blister, climbed up, and opened the plane's bay.

The Ilyushin's electronic spygear had been partially stripped, replaced with tarped-down heaps and stacks of contraband. Starlitz bonked his head on the plane's low bulkhead. "Damn," he said. "I sure miss those Badgers."

"Be grateful we have aircraft at all!" Khoklov said. He climbed the ladder and peered in curiously. "Think how many mule-loads of treasure have flown in my plane tonight. Romantic secret caravans, creeping slowly over the Khyber Pass. . . . And this is just a fraction of the secret trade. Many mules die in the minefields."

"Toss me that pulley hook, ace." Starlitz swung out a strapped-up stack of Hitachi videocassette recorders.

Starlitz, with methodic efficiency, drove forklift-loads of loot from the hangar out to the truck. Korean "Gold Star" tape players. Compact discs of remixed jazz classics. Fifty kilo-bricks of fudge-soft black Afghan hashish. Ten crates of J&B scotch. A box of foil-sealed lubricated condoms, items of avid and fabulous rarity. Two hundred red cartons of Dunhills,

still in their cellophane. Black nylon panty hose.

And gold. Gold czarist rubles, the lifeblood of the Soviet black economy. The original slim supply of nineteenth-century imperial rubles couldn't meet the frenzied modern demand, so they were counterfeited especially for the Soviet market, by goldsmiths in Egypt, Lebanon and Pakistan. The rubles came sealed in long strips of transparent plastic, for use in money belts.

Khoklov was fidgeting. "We have re-created the *Arabian Nights*," he said, running a flat ribbon of plasticized bullion over his sleeve. He leaned against a dusty concrete feeding trough. "It is Ali Baba and the forty *shabashniki*. . . . We meant to 'smash the last vestige of feudalism.' We meant to 'defend the socialist revolution.' All we really have done is create a thieves' market worthy of legend! With ourselves as the eager customers."

Khoklov lit a fresh Dunhill from the stub of the last. "You should see Kabul today, Comrade Starlitz. It's still a vile medieval dump, but every alleyway is full of whores and thieves, every breed of petty capitalist! They tug our sleeves and offer us smuggled Western luxuries we could never find at home. Even the mujihadeen bandits drop their Yankee rifles to sell us soap and aspirin. Now that we're leaving, no one thinks of anything but backdoor hustling. We are all desperate for the last tasty drink of Coca-Cola, before your Afghan adventure is over."

"You sound a little wired, ace," Starlitz said. "You could lend me a hand, you know. Might get the kinks out."

"Not my assignment," Khoklov sniffed. "You can take your share of all this, comrade. Be content."

"What with the trouble it took, you'd think this junk would have more class," Starlitz said. He slid down the ladder with a cardboard box.

"Ah!" said Khoklov. "So it's glamour you want, my grimy Uzbek friend? You have it there in your hands. A wonderful Hollywood movie! Give me that box."

Starlitz tossed it to him. Khoklov ripped it open. "I must take a few cassettes for my fellows at DRAAF. They love this film. *Top Gun*! Yankee pilots kill Moslems in it. They strafe with F-16s, in many excellent flying-combat scenes!"

"Hollywood," Starlitz said. "A bunch of crap."

Khoklov shook his head carefully. "The Yankees will have to kill the Moslems, now that we're giving it up! Libya, that Persian Gulf business. . . . It's only a matter of time." Khoklov began stuffing videocassettes into

his flight jacket and set it on the edge of the trough.

"Cool!" Starlitz said, staring at it. "What model is that?"

"It's a war trophy," Khoklov said. "A luck charm, is all."

"Lemme look, ace."

Khoklov showed him the gun.

"Looks like a Czech 'Skorpion' 5.66 millimeter," Starlitz said. "Something really weird about it, though. . . ."

"It's homemade," Khoklov said. "An Afghan village blacksmith copied it. They are clever as monkeys with their hands." He shook his head. "It's pig iron, hand-drilled. . . . You can see where he engraved some little flowers into the pistol butt."

"Wow!" Starlitz exulted. "How much?"

"It's not for sale, comrade."

Starlitz reached into a pocket of his tattered Levi's and pulled out a fat roll of dollars, held with a twist of wire. "Say when, ace." He began peeling off bills and slapping them down: one hundred, two hundred. . . .

"That's enough," Khoklov said after a moment. He examined the bills carefully, his pale hands shaking a little. "These are real American dollars! Where did you get all this?"

"Found it in a turnip patch," Starlitz said. He crammed the wad carelessly back into his jeans, lifted the gun with reverence, and sniffed its barrel. "You ever fire this thing?"

"No. But its first owner did. At the people's fraternal forces."

"Huh. It'd be better if it were mint. It's beautiful anyway, though." Starlitz twirled the pistol on one finger, grinning triumphantly. "Too bad there's no safety catch."

"The Afghans never bother with them."

"Neither do I," Starlitz said. He stuffed the gun in the back of his jeans.

There were odds and ends in the plane, and one big item left: a Whirlpool clothes washer in bright lemon-yellow enamel. Starlitz manhandled it into the back of the ZIL with the other loot, and carefully laced the truck's canvas, hiding everything from view.

"Well, that's about it," Starlitz said, dusting his callused hands. "Now we'll get you gassed up and out of here, ace."

"About time," Khoklov said. He dry-swallowed a pair of white tablets from a gunmetal pillbox. "Next time be sure your worthless crew of Armenian ethnics is fully prepared for my arrival."

Starlitz jammed a big tin funnel into the Ilyushin's starboard wing tank. Against the hangar wall were two long rows of oily jerry cans, full of aviation kerosene. Starlitz hoisted a can one-handed to his shoulder and began decanting fuel, humming to himself. It was a slow process. As the pills came on, impatience struck Khoklov. He lugged jerry cans two-handed to the port wing tank, waddling with the weight.

The first row of cans was emptied. Khoklov started on the second. He heaved at a can and stumbled backward. "This one is empty!" he said. He tried the next. "This one, too."

The entire second row of cans had been drained. Khoklov kicked the final can across the hangar with a hollow bonging. "We've been robbed!"

"Looks that way," Starlitz admitted.

"Your thieving Armenians!" Khoklov shouted. "They have embezzled the fuel! For a few lousy black-market rubles, they have stranded me here! My God, I'm finished!"

"Coulda been worse," Starlitz offered. "They coulda filled the cans with water instead. Flying low and fast, you'da pranged for sure." He thought it over. "Or bailed out over Iran. That woulda been hairy, ace."

"But they've ruined me! Ruined the whole operation! How could they be such meatheads?"

"Beats me," Starlitz said. "Times are tough here; fuel's in tight supply. . . But be cool. We'll find you some go-juice somehow. The Boss must have some. The Boss may be mean, and ruthless, and greedy, and totally corrupt, but he's not stupid, y'know. He's probably got kerosene hoarded, just in case."

"He'd better!" Khoklov said.

"We'll go to the Estate and ask around," Starlitz told him. "I'll give you a lift in the truck."

Khoklov's panic faded. He tagged after Starlitz and climbed up into the cab of the ZIL. Starlitz steered the truck down the airstrip, mashing the runway flares into embers under the ZIL's giant wheels. He flicked on the ZIL's headlights and turned onto a dirt road.

"Such a big truck and such a nasty little cab," Khoklov griped. He killed what was left of the vodka. Then he stared moodily out the windshield, at tall weeds ghost-pale by the roadside. "This situation's an outrage. The whole nation has lost its bearings, if you ask me. Especially in the provinces. It's getting very bad here, isn't it?"

"Yeah, this used to be good cropland," Starlitz said.

"Never mind the mere physical landscape," Khoklov scoffed. "I mean *politically*, comrade. Even lousy black marketeers openly defy Party authority."

"The Party is the black marketeers, ace. It couldn't work any other way."

The headquarters of the local agricultural complex had an official name, something with a long Cyrillic acronym. To those who knew about the place, it was just the Estate. It was the country seat of the Party chairman of the Azerbaijani Soviet Socialist Republic. The chairman had a proper name, too, but no one used it. He was generally known as "the Boss."

Starlitz took the back entrance through the high, wire-topped walls. It was late, and he didn't want to wake the armed guards in their marble kiosks in the front. He thoughtfully parked the monster truck by the racehorse stables, where its booming diesel would not disturb the slumber of the staff.

Starlitz and Khoklov walked across the groomed lawn slick with peacock droppings. Massive sprinklers, purloined from a farm project, clanked and hissed above the croquet grounds. Starlitz paused to tie his shoe under the giant concrete statue of Lenin. Khoklov chased some monster goldfish away in the fountain, and drank from his hands.

Starlitz yanked a bellpull at one of the back doors. There was no response. Starlitz kicked the door heartily with his tattered Keds high-top sneaker. Lights came on inside, and a butler showed, in pants and undershirt.

This man was not officially a "butler," but a production-team brigade leader for the collective farm. The distinction didn't mean much. The butler's name was Yan "Cross-Eyes" Rakotov. Rakotov, who was corpulent and scarred, favored the two of them with his eerie gaze. "Now what?" he said.

"Need some kerosene," Starlitz said.

"How much?"

"Maybe five hundred liters?" Starlitz said.

Rakovtsov showed no surprise. "Would gasoline do?" he said. Khoklov shook his head. Rakotov thought about it. "How about pure alcohol? I think we have enough to fill an airplane. Ever since the Kremlin's sobriety campaign started, we've been bringing it in by the truckload."

Rakovtsov's wife showed up, squint-eyed and clutching her house robe. "You bastard drunks!" she hissed. "*Shabashniki!* Buying booze at this time

of night! Go home and let good Communists sleep in peace!"

"Shut up, woman," Rakotov said. "Look, this is pilot here."

"Oh," said Mrs. Rakotov, startled. "Sorry, Comrade Pilot! Would you like some nice tea? Did you bring my nylons?"

"Life is hard," Rakotov muttered. "I know the Boss keeps kerosene, but I think it's stored in town. He's in town now, you know. Political problems."

"Too bad," Starlitz said.

"Yes, he left this morning. Took the limousine, the kitchen bus, the cooks, his personal staff, even the live baby lamb for his lunch. He said not to expect him back for at least a week." Rakotov straightened. "So you two can regard me as the Boss here, for the time being."

"My people expect *me* back by morning!" Khoklov shouted. "There's going to be big trouble when I fail to show at the Kabul air base!"

Rakov's giddy eyes narrowed. "Really? Why's that?"

"A military plane is not like one of your rural buses, comrade! There's no excuse for a failure to show up! And if I return too late, they'll know I have landed somewhere, illegally! The whole business here will be exposed!"

"That would be a terrible tragedy for a great many people," Rakotov said slowly. He cleared his throat. "Say . . . I just remembered something. We have an underground fuel cistern, in the east wing. Why don't you come with me, Comrade Pilot? We can inspect it."

"Good idea!" Starlitz broke in. "There're some empty jerry cans in the truck. Me and the ace here will fetch 'em. We'll be right back." He grabbed Khoklov's sleeve.

Khoklov came reluctantly across the darkened lawn. "Can't you wake up some local peasants, and have them do this haulage labor? They ought to do something; God knows they're not growing any food here."

Starlitz lowered his voice. "Wise up, ace. The east wing is a *dungeon*, man, a big underground bunker."

"But. . . ." Khoklov hesitated. "You really think . . . ? But I'm a Red Army officer!"

"So what? The Boss has already got a State Farm chief in there, a personnel director, a couple of busybody snoops from Internal Affairs. . . . He bottles up anybody he likes, and there's no appeal, no recourse — the guy runs everything. He's a top Party Moslem, man, the closest thing to Genghis Khan." Starlitz urged Khoklov up into the truck. "Think it over from their angle, ace. If you just vanish here, DRAAF will think you've been

killed on duty. Hit by ack-ack, down somewhere in rough terrain. Nothing to tie you to the Boss, or Azerbaijan, or the black market."

"They'd put me in a dungeon?"

"They can't let you run around loose here — you're AWOL, with no residence passport. And you're Russian, too — you could never pass for a local."

"My God!" Khoklov put his head in his hands. "I'm done for!"

Starlitz threw the truck into gear. "How long have you *been* in the military, man? Show some initiative, for Christ's sake."

"What are you doing?" Khoklov said.

"Winging it," Starlitz said, driving off. "After all, there're a lotta possibilities." He thumbed over his shoulder. "We got a truckload of very heavy capital back there." He shifted his denim-clad butt on the busted springs of the truck seat. "And pretty soon you'll be officially dead, ace. That's kind of a neat thing to be, actually. . . ."

"What's the point of this? What can we possibly accomplish, all by ourselves, alone here?"

"Well, lemme think out loud," Starlitz said cheerily, taking a corner with a squeal. "We do have half a load of fuel in your plane; that's something, at least. . . . Kabul's definitely out of range, but you could make Turkey, easy. There's a big NATO air base in Kars, just over the border from Tbilisi. Maybe you could land there. The West would love to have an Ilyushin-14. It'd be the biggest haul for 'em since Lieutenant Belenko flew his MiG-25 to Japan."

"That's *treason*!" Khoklov shouted.

"Yeah, it is," Starlitz said indifferently. "And that's one tough border, too. . . . Not like Iran, y'know. You might pull a Matthias Rust on the way out, if you're a real hot-dog terrain flyer. But there's no way you're gonna get your crate past NATO."

"Don't insult me by questioning my professional abilities!" Khoklov said. "I could do it easily enough! But I am a loyal Soviet officer, not a traitor to my Motherland like Viktor Ivanovich Belenko."

"I hear old Viktor's living somewhere near Washington now," Starlitz said. "Got big cars, blondes, whiskey. . . . But if that's not for you, it's fine with me, ace. . . ." Starlitz grinned toothily.

"The criminal life must be rotting your brain," Khoklov said, crossing his arms. His chin sank slowly into the white silk of his ascot. "Besides,

they wouldn't let me fly, would they? The Yankees would never let me fly their best aircraft. An F-16, say. A Lockheed SR-71." His voice was reverent.

"You'd be rich, though," Starlitz said. "You could buy, like . . . a Cessna, all for yourself."

Khoklov laughed harshly. "A civilian subsonic. No, thank you."

"I know how ya feel," Starlitz admitted. "Well, ace, we gotta find you your fuel. We got a chance, at least, if we can find the Boss. I'm gonna roll this baby into town."

The private police force at the border of the collective farm did not stop them. They were used to heavily loaded trucks leaving at odd hours. Starlitz slung the ZIL onto the neatly paved road. Through no accident, this was the best-maintained road in Azerbaijan. At this hour it was almost deserted. Starlitz ratcheted his manual accelerator up to top speed.

The road was lined for miles with elegant shade trees, a transplanted species unsuited to the local climate. The dead trees' peeling trunks zipped by in the headlights, their bare twigs ripped by the ZIL's backwash. Planting the trees had been an attractive idea, carried out with complete incompetence. The Boss wouldn't mind, however. Abject failure always made him redouble his efforts.

Khoklov looked jittery. He was having second thoughts. "Why are you doing this, Starlitz?" he shouted over the blasting roar of the engine. "Why are you taking such trouble for my sake? I don't understand your motives."

Starlitz felt for a cigarette, speeding along one-handed. "I'm the ground crew, man. I handle the planes. That's my *function*."

"But won't you get in trouble for these actions? You could have let Rakotov put me in the prison. Destroy all the evidence, and so forth."

Starlitz was disgusted. "That's no use. That won't make the plane fly, man."

"Oh," Khoklov said.

"The system must be maintained, ace." Starlitz lit up with a flick of the Cricket, his eyes glazed with eerie ontological assurance. "It's . . . what there is. As long as it lasts." He blew smoke.

"Right," Khoklov said uneasily. He put on his Walkman headphones and searched in his jacket for a cassette. Soon the reedy buzz of The Doors percolated out past his translucent, close-cropped ears.

They drove into the capital of Nagorno-Karabakh, the most miserable province of the Azerbaijani Soviet Socialist Republic. The town had never

really recovered from the Civil War of the twenties, or the purges of the thirties, or even the Great Patriotic War of the forties. Collapse had become the status quo.

Most of the townsfolk were Armenians, an ethnic group whom everyone else within thousands of kilometers delighted in oppressing. Thanks to Stalin, a big lump of lost Armenians had been caught here in the middle of Azerbaijan, like a Christian prune in a Moslem fruitcake. And here they were still, with their cruddy, flyspecked stores and beat-up, dusty churches, and cracked streets blocked off for "repair" for years at a time.

Starlitz drove his truck down an alley, through towering, overcrowded apartment blocks built of substandard concrete. They rolled into an open, deserted plaza. Discarded protest signs crunched under the ZIL's monster tires. The plaza still stank of tear gas; empty canisters of it lay around like Schlitz cans after a beer bust. There were sticky patches of blood, and odd greenish lumps that were the manure of police horses.

A large and hideous government building, in Stalinesque fifties gingerbread, had been stoned by the mob. Shattered glass lay before its gaping windows, glinting in the headlights.

Starlitz drove on warily. The crowd had pulled a big ferroconcrete statue from its pedestal in the center of the plaza. After its sudden descent down to earth, the statue's stone head had broken into disenchanting rubble. Chunks of its face had been stolen, presumably as souvenirs.

"Wonder who that was?" Starlitz said. "That statue, I mean."

"Some local ruffian, no doubt," Khoklov said. He shook his head. "At heart, the People are still loyal to the Soviet ideals of the Party. It is only the provincial distortions of the economy that have provoked this ugly event."

"Oh," said Starlitz. "Good. For a minute I figured there was some kinda real trouble here."

"You mean, like an ethnic, nationalist mass movement, demanding self-determination and a devolution of centralized state power?" Khoklov said. "No, comrade; a serious political analysis will show that's not the true case at all. I'm sure that a measured restructuring of state resources, and a cautious but thorough redressing of their economic grievances, will soon lead the Armenians back to the path of social cooperations."

"Nice to know somebody still reads *Pravda*," Starlitz said. He bright-

ened. "Look, ace, we're in luck. Here come some cops!"

An open-topped jeep came tearing across the plaza, crammed with uniformed local police in riot helmets. Khoklov went pale and shrank down in his seat, but Starlitz stopped the ZIL and climbed out.

The jeep screeched up short. A militia sergeant jumped out and menaced Starlitz with a riot baton. "Your papers!"

"Never mind that crap," Starlitz told him. "Where have you been? We've been waiting."

"What?" the sergeant said.

"This is a special shipment for the Boss," Starlitz said, pointing at the truck. "Aren't you our police escort?"

"No! What are you doing here at this hour?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Starlitz said. "I can't drive a black-market truck in broad daylight, through streets full of thieving, rioting Armenians! There've been enough delays in this shipment already! If you're not our special escort, then where the hell are they?"

"Everyone's doing overtime," the cop said wearily. "Perhaps we somehow lost track of our Party chairman's whims. We're trying to keep order here. There's been confusion."

"Hell," Starlitz said, kicking the pried-up cobblestone. "I'm gonna catch it for this. . . . Look, stop whatever you're doing, and take us straight to the Boss, O.K.? I'll make it worth your while. Come round to the back of the truck. Nobody'll miss a little off the top."

The sergeant grinned slowly. He waved the other cops into the back of the ZIL. After some gleeful argument, they decamped with a video recorder and six bottles of J&B scotch.

"You're robbing me," Starlitz complained.

The jeep led the way. This was useful, as it got them past the nervous police checkpoints around the Boss's urban headquarters.

Officially, this place was a Workers' Palace of Culture, built years ago for a puppet trade union of textile workers. The textile workers now existed only on paper, as the Azerbaijani cotton crops had been disastrous for years. The Boss had put the building to his own uses, and improved it considerably, with lavish use of stolen state materials and impressed labor. The Boss's five-story city palace looked like a diseased wedding cake, brilliantly lit and painted in ghastly pastels.

Inside the courtyard the palace grounds were clustered with the black

limousines of Party notables. The Boss's customary caravan of brushed-aluminum tour buses was parked on the lawn, next to a gaily frilled pavilion with picnic tables and fire-blackened shish kebab pits. It was very late, and a meeting was in the final throes of dissolution. Vomiting Azerbaijan bigwigs tottered to their limos, assisted by mistresses and functionaries.

Starlitz parked the ZIL atop a fragrant row of oleander bushes.

"What's going on here?" Khoklov said, staring in disbelief. "Some kind of festival?"

"Yeah." Starlitz looked at Khoklov critically. "Straighten up that tie you're wearing, or whatever it is." Starlitz leaned from the window to peer in the ZIL's rearview mirror. He scrubbed grease from his face with his sleeve, then licked his hand and smeared it on his hair. "We gotta pass for Beautiful People, O.K.?" he said. "Smoke these Marlboros like you get 'em every day, and make sure everybody sees you've got a Walkman."

The double doors of the palace were propped wide open. Starlitz and Khoklov swaggered in boldly. They followed music to a ground-floor worker's gymnasium, refitted to mimic a ballroom. A homemade mirror ball wobbled on the ceiling before a lighted stage with heavy canvas draperies. Small tables lined the walls under chintzy fake gas lamps with forty-watt reddish light bulbs.

The band had played its final set; they were packing up their *bazoukis* and a brace of slotted microphones the size of bread loaves. The velvet sound of a smuggled Mel Tormé tape came from the speakers. Most of the Party bigwigs were already gone; there were a dozen tired teenage Armenian hookers, dance girls, sitting in a line of folding chairs. At the sight of Khoklov's air force jacket, and Starlitz's bogus Red Army getup, they started chattering and elbowing each other.

A sinuous woman with dark, high-piled hair approached them across the dance floor. She wore sequined velvet trousers, high-heeled pumps, and a fancy embroidered jacket. Starlitz straightened warily.

"Oh," the woman said, smiling with a flash of pointed teeth. "So it's you. What a pleasant surprise."

Starlitz tried an ingratiating grin. "Good evening, Tamara Akhmedovna."

"I thought you two were soldiers," Tamara said. She fingered the lapel of Starlitz's Red Army jacket. "You shouldn't wear clothes like this into town. People will talk."

"They smuggle everything, from diamonds to bananas. They carry big knives, too."

"Who is this charming lady?" Khoklov said.

"This is the Boss's wife, ace," Starlitz muttered. "The Sultana."

"Please!" Tamara said, dimpling. "No *friend* of mine calls me that. A simple 'Madame Party Chairman' will do. . . ." Tamara's kohl-lined, liquid eyes studied Khoklov with languorous attention. "Who is this mysterious young man, and why is he dressed like an airman?"

"Uh, we had a little trouble down by the airstrip, Tamara. . . . Could we have a word outside, or something?"

Tamara's face went flinty for a moment. "Very well," she said. "Wait here, while I see that the artistes are properly compensated. . . ." She drifted away.

"Good God!" Khoklov whispered, grabbing Starlitz's elbow. "She's beautiful! What's she doing married to that old ogre?"

"Tamara's the biggest black-market hustler in Azerbaijani," Starlitz said, brushing Khoklov's hand away. "Her husband does everything illegal in Tamara's name. She's got a million Moslem relatives; they're all on the take. They smuggle everything, from diamonds to bananas. They carry big, sharp knives, too. So keep your pants on."

Tamara returned, having fee'd off the musicians and hookers. "May I suggest a stroll in the garden?" she said, arching her brows. "The Bukhara roses are in bloom."

"That's swell," Starlitz said. They went outside, away from the palace's lavish inner network of listening devices. Starlitz made introductions.

"So you're our brave pilot?" Tamara said. "How nice to meet you. If it weren't for you, Captain, I wouldn't have this Final Net hair spray." She touched her coiffure. "It holds up even when I no longer can."

"Your hair does look lovely," Khoklov said. "And you speak such excellent Russian, too. It's a delight to the ear."

"Listen, Tamara," Starlitz broke in. "We need five hundred kilos of aviation kerosene. Old Cross-Eyes, back at the farm, said the Boss might have some."

"My husband is sleeping," Tamara said. "He's had a very trying day. All this political turmoil. He deserves his rest, poor dear."

"I must get fuel somehow, and fly back to Kabul tonight," Khoklov said. "If I don't, the sacrifice of my career is perhaps a small matter. But I'm afraid it might cause you some inconvenience."

"I'm sure I understand," Tamara nodded. "You were right to come to me, Captain Khoklov. We can't have our Kabul shipments disrupted. We'll need proper lavish gifts, to curry favor with the generals, now that the army's coming."

"The army, huh?" Starlitz said.

"They're invading tomorrow, to beat some sense into these ungrateful Christians," Tamara said. "My husband just announced the news to the Azerbaijan Party regulars, at our little business meeting here tonight. Everyone's delighted about the military crackdown. I think our troubles are over!"

"Hey, that's exciting news," Starlitz said. "We still need the fuel, though."

"Let me think," Tamara said. She touched her chin with one lacquered forefinger. "Aha! The military supply train. It's already here in town, prepared for the troops' arrival. I'm sure they wouldn't miss a few liters from their tank cars."

"That's great," Starlitz said. "I know the way to the railhead. We'll take the truck."

"You didn't bring the ZIL, did you?" Tamara gazed at the olive-drab bulk atop the crushed oleander bushes. "Oh dear, you did, didn't you?"

"Had to improvise," Starlitz said.

"We borrowed that Red Army truck from nice old General Akbarov, you know. We promised him that we wouldn't flaunt it around carelessly. People might talk."

"It's a problem," Starlitz admitted. "It's full of goodies, too. Coupla tons."

"Three tons!" Khoklov declared. "The choicest wares and viands of the Khyber caravans, fit for a czarina!"

"Now, now," said Tamara, favoring him with a smile. "We're simple servants of the People, Captain, doing what we can to keep our homeland prosperous, under very trying conditions. . . . It's a pity you didn't come earlier. Your cargo would have made nice Party favors." Tamara made a quick decision. "I'll have the servants — I mean the *service personnel* — unload the truck, here at our City Palace. There's plenty of storage room in our basement. And we'll take one of my husband's buses down to the

train station, to get your fuel. I'm sure it won't take long."

Starlitz widened his eyes. "Great! I always wanted to drive one of those special buses."

Starlitz and Khoklov stacked the empty jerry cans into the back of the bus, while Tamara made arrangements. Soon they were in the bus together, behind a vast windshield expanse of smoked glass. Starlitz seized the driver's seat and gleefully fired the engine. Khoklov sat in the passenger's side, behind a bulky radiotelephone set. Tamara sat cross-legged between them, on a flat vinyl couch, which led, behind her, to a vast plush-padded nest with cozy bunk beds, brocade curtains, and a kitchenette. The bus reeked pleasantly of hashish and shish kebab.

Starlitz rolled it smoothly out of the compound. "Now, don't show off," Tamara chided. "I know you're a very good driver, but don't scratch my husband's nice machine, or he'll shout at me."

"Can't have that," Starlitz said, spinning the wheel one-handed. He grinned. "This is living, though, isn't it, ace? We can drive anywhere in the province, at any speed we like, and no one will dare to touch us! Everybody knows this bus belongs to the Party chairman. What a great setup!"

"You're a rascal," Tamara said. "You shouldn't talk like that; people listen, you know. You'll have to forgive him, Comrade Captain."

"Please," Khoklov said. "Call me Pulat Romanevich."

Tamara gazed limpidly out the windshield as they rolled past a long concrete-block wall splattered with angry Armenian graffiti. "Come now," she said softly. "We scarcely know each other, Captain."

"I'm a lonely warrior far from home," Khoklov told her. "If I seem too bold, forgive me. Friendship comes quickly in wartime. It's how we pilots live, you see. A flyer never knows if he will greet the dawn."

"Oh yes," Tamara mused. "There is a war on, isn't there?"

"My next assignment will be bombing bandit camps over the Pakistani border," Khoklov said. "'Unofficially,' of course."

"That's a tough one," Starlitz nodded. "Some of those refugees have guns."

"It's nothing," Khoklov scoffed. "In the Panjgur Valley, they fire down onto the planes, from high on their mountainsides. And you must fly low, because the bandits hide their huts in little crevices."

Khoklov showed Tamara a gold-rimmed mission patch. "I got this one for the Panjgur campaign. The bandits there stopped nine different ground

assaults: tanks, artillery, infantry columns. . . . Finally we air boys stepped in. Just flattened the place, you see; there was nothing left, so resistance stopped."

"What about this patch?" Tamara said, touching his sleeve.

"That was the siege of Herat," Khoklov said. "The bandits there were total fanatics! We had to carpet-bomb half the city before we could save it."

"I can see that you love to flirt with danger," Tamara said.

Slowly, Khoklov smiled. "I'm a career officer, with close ties to the KGB. I'm a political liaison with the Afghan Air Force. It's a very . . . *special* kind of game."

Tamara's eyes sparkled. "What was the most *dangerous* thing that ever happened to you?"

"Ah," Khoklov said, "that would be the time a Chinese heat-seeker hit my aft engine in the Wakhan Corridor. . . . I almost nursed my bird back to Bagram Air Base, but I had to hit the silk in bandit territory. After three days in the wilderness, a Spetsnaz ranger team picked me up with their helicopter gunship. . . ." Khoklov suavely lit a Marlboro and gazed dramatically out the window. "I wouldn't want you to think it's something special, Tamara. For us, it's a job, that's all; our socialist duty. Those Spetsnaz rangers, the elite black berets . . . now, those sons of bitches are what I call brave men! I owe them my life, you know."

Khoklov felt inside his pocket. "They were good friends. One of them gave me this souvenir . . . oh hell, you've got it now."

"Yeah," Starlitz said. "And I've been meaning to ask you about that jacket you're wearing, Tamara Akhmedovna. It's really beautiful."

"This?" Tamara said, spreading her arms. "Just a little homemade . . . nothing."

"That's actually a black Levi's jean jacket, imported from the West, right?" Starlitz said. "Only, it's been lined with virgin wool, it's got a tanned sheepskin collar, and somebody — somebody really good with a needle — has blind-stitched an embroidery picture of a combine harvester across the back."

"That's right," Tamara said, surprised. "Plus a little group of cheerful peasants with their sickles. It was a socialist-realist poster, you see, from one of the collectivization campaigns. . . . My husband came up through the Agriculture Bureau. It was a little gift to us from some grateful villagers."

"Wow," Starlitz said, reaching into his pocket. "I'd really like to have that. Can we do business?"

"I do business," Tamara said with dignity. "But I'm also the wife of the Party chairman. I don't have to sell the clothes off my back!"

"Yeah, I know that, but . . .," Starlitz began. "How about if—"

"Turn here," Tamara commanded.

They had reached the railway. The place was black as pitch. "Oh dear," Tamara said. "I wish they'd do something about these power failures. I can't go walking out there in these heels."

"And I don't know the territory," Khoklov said quickly.

"Yeah, yeah, I get the point," Starlitz said. He opened the door reluctantly, saddened to leave the driver's seat. "Well, there's bound to be somebody out there I can hustle. I'll be back later for the jerry cans."

"Maybe there's a flashlight," Tamara said, sliding lithely into the back of the bus. "If I can find it, we'll come after you."

"I'll help her look," Khoklov said.

"Sure, sure," Starlitz said.

He walked off into darkness, pebbles crunching under his sneakers. The smells were promising: hot brake oil, raw whiffs of petrochemical stench. Starlitz pulled his Cricket lighter, twisted it, and flicked the switch. A six-inch butane jet flared up. Starlitz lit a Marlboro at arm's length, and found his way up a concrete ramp to the loading docks.

A series of yellow-stenciled tank cars had been parked on a siding. Quick flashes of the lighter guided him.

Starlitz felt his way to the tank car's gigantic manual faucet. It wouldn't budge. Starlitz took a few deep breaths, then bent over and wrenched a railroad spike from a tie with his bare fingers. He whacked enthusiastically at the tap, with earsplitting clanks and thuds. No dice.

A red railroad lantern came swaying down the line. Starlitz ducked under a freight car, clutching his spike. As the guard crept past, Starlitz recognized him. He crept out and tapped the man's shoulder.

The guard whirled with a yelp. "Be cool," Starlitz said. "It's me, man."

"Comrade Starlitz!" the guard said.

"I thought you were on strike, Vartan," Starlitz said, tossing his spike.

"I'm on strike from my *illegal* job, unloading the Boss's black-market airplanes," the Armenian said. He was still jittery; his eyes rolled a little

under his corduroy cap brim. "But my *legal* job here, as a railroad guard, is too vital to neglect!"

"You mean you can't give up stealing from freight cars," Starlitz said.

"Well, yes," Vartan admitted. "But if I didn't steal freight, I couldn't stay in the black market." He shrugged unhappily.

"Get real," Starlitz said, dusting his hands. "Everyone's in the black market. That's the beauty of the system."

Vartan cleared his throat uneasily. "It wasn't my idea to strike, you know," he said. "It was Hovanessian's."

"He's the skinny kid in the crew, with the glasses, right? The smart one?"

"The stupid one," Vartan said. "Always talking 'openness' and 'restructuring.' Calls himself a 'dissident' and leads protests in the street. He's a big pain in the ass."

"Lemme guess," Starlitz said. "He's the one who had the bright idea to steal our kerosene from the hangar."

"That's right."

"And it's all in empty vodka bottles now, with rags stuffed on top of it. Hidden in basements and attics. Belonging to Hovanessian and his radical nationalist pals."

"It's no use hiding anything from you, Comrade Starlitz," Vartan said. "Yes, Hovanessian wants to fight. Any weapon is useful, he said. Even the famous flaming cocktails of former Minister Molotov."

"Yeah?" Starlitz said. "He gonna match his little busted bottles against these big Red Army tank cars?"

Vartan smirked. "None of us want to fight soldiers. We're all good Soviets; ask anybody! The son-of-a-bitch Moslem ragheads are the real problem."

"Think so, huh?"

"They breed like rats. They're taking over everything! A whole swarm of them moved into the house next door, right into a Christian neighborhood. It's intolerable!" Vartan glowed with righteous determination. "Besides, the Red Army won't hurt us. They're used to killing Moslems. They're on our side, really."

"There's gonna be a crackdown," Starlitz told him. "Or a big crack-up. . . . I'm not sure what yet, but I can smell it coming. The system here is gonna blow." His words hung on the empty air. Starlitz scratched his bristled

head and smirked, with a scary parody of candor. "I know what I'm talking about," he muttered. "I got a definite *feel* for this kind of situation."

Vartan shuffled his feet, which were clad in boots soled with folded newspapers. "I'm sure you do, Comrade Starlitz! Although your role in the Boss's operation is humble, all of your Armenian subordinates greatly respect your insight and political perspicacity."

"Knock it off with that crap!" Starlitz said. He frowned. "Listen to me. When your real trouble comes, it's gonna be serious news, pal. Not at all like you think."

Vartan blinked unhappily. "Life is hard," he said at last. "I'm not asking for miracles, comrade. All I really want is to see my neighbor's house burn down." Vartan spread his hands modestly. "It wouldn't take very much, would it? Just lob a few flaming bottles in, some dark night. . . . It's worth a try."

"You ever try to burn down a house before?" Starlitz said. "You'll burn down your own house, man."

"I thought *my* Russian was bad," Vartan scoffed. "I didn't say *my* house; I said *his* house." Vartan drew a breath. "We Armenians have had it, that's all. I'm a regular guy; I'm no egghead dissident. But we're gonna settle some scores here, once and for all. The old-fashioned way."

Vartan kicked the tank car viciously. "So just forget about our little theft from the Boss's airstrip. Here's all the fuel you need, right here. I'll steal it for you; you can take all you want. Just take it away, and forget you saw me here."

"Better think it over," Starlitz said.

Vartan narrowed his eyes. "Look, you're no red-blooded Armenian, either, Comrade Straw Boss. You're a Tajik, right? Or an Uzbek or something. . . ."

Vartan stopped suddenly, surprised. An odd subliminal chill had entered the air. There was a faint, sullen, almost inaudible rumble. The railway cars rocked and squeaked on their axles.

Starlitz narrowed his eyes. His knees were bent, his hands hung loose, and he was balanced on the balls of his feet. "D'you *feel* that, man?"

Vartan shook his head. "It was nothing . . . just the rail settling. Some of the ties are rotten."

Starlitz looked at him. "Have it your way," he said at last. "I'll be back soon with some jerry cans."

Starlitz trotted back to the bus. He climbed into the driver's seat and started the engine. "You guys O.K.?" Starlitz said. Subdued giggling came from the back of the bus, and springy crunching of a bunk.

Starlitz sighed. "Either of you feel the earth move, just a while ago?"

"Don't make bad jokes," Tamara chided.

"O.K.," Starlitz shrugged. "We're gonna roll now."

He drove the truck along the rail line until he found the proper siding. He parked the bus and started ferrying jerry cans.

Vartan had broken open the tap with a pry bar. Kerosene was dribbling steadily. The rails beneath the tank were already dark with it. "You're wasting it," Starlitz said.

"Don't joke," Vartan said. "This is a whole tank car."

"It's splashing over everything," Starlitz said.

"You think the *army's* gonna put it to better use?"

Starlitz ferried filled cans to the back of the bus. "That fuel really stinks," Khoklov complained. "I hope you're almost done, Starlitz."

"Close," Starlitz said.

"Burn some more hashish," Tamara suggested. "That Afghan brick smells lovely."

"I lost the matches," Khoklov said. "Throw me your lighter, Starlitz."

Starlitz tossed him the Cricket. Khoklov thumbed it and shrieked as the flame jetted out. "Christ! Cut in the afterburner," he said. Tamara laughed.

"Gimme some of that," Starlitz said. Khoklov appeared from the darkness, in his ribbed Christian Dior undershirt. He passed Starlitz a fist-sized clod of hash.

When Starlitz had filled the last can, he gave the hash to the Armenian. "It's for your trouble," he said. "Don't smoke it on the job, O.K.?"

"Stop worrying," Vartan said, pocketing it.

"Here's a lighter," Starlitz said. "Be real careful with it."

"You must think I'm an idiot," Vartan said. He was struggling wearily with the broken tank-car tap. It had been stripped somehow; it refused to shut off.

Starlitz drove away. "Well, ace, I told you we'd manage," he said. "What do you say, Tamara Akhmedovna? Do we drop you off at the Palace of Culture, or do we head straight for the airstrip?"

"If you think I'll let you drive this bus all by yourself, you must be

more stoned than I am," Tamara said. "Open some windows, darling. That kerosene reeks."

"It's kind of a mess back there at the railhead," Starlitz said. "Had to smash and grab. Not too subtle."

"Drive fast, then, and drive to the farm," Tamara said. "Anyway, I'm not through consoling this Soviet hero yet." She laughed giddily. "Whoa! What a shiver! I think those pills are coming on. . . . What did you call those?"

"Dexedrine," Khoklov said. "For combat alertness."

"And you say the *air force* gives you these?" Tamara said. "My! I think I know some people in the air force. They've been keeping secrets."

"Oh, not us air boys," Khoklov said. "We're as clear and simple as the day is long."

"Everyone has secrets," Tamara protested gaily. "Even the chauffeur. Tell Captain Khoklov some of your secrets, Lekhi Starlitz!"

"Gimme a break," Starlitz said.

"You know where we found this man?" Tamara said. "In prison. The Soviet border guards had caught him trying to sneak into Iran!"

"Holy mother," Khoklov said, interested. "Why?"

"Smuggling gig," Starlitz said reluctantly. "Had some business friends there . . . trying to smuggle rock and roll into the country. The mullahs shoot people for possession of rock. Makes music worth a lot."

"Oh, I love rock and roll!" Khoklov enthused. "Especially Yankee music from the sixties. It really speaks to my groovy soul, when I'm strafing a village. . . . What kind of rock music was it, exactly?"

"I dunno, man. Stuff I got cheap. Cowsills, Carpenters, Bobby Goldsboro. . . ."

"I never heard of those," Khoklov said, crestfallen.

"Ask him about his money," Tamara prodded. "He always has a roll of hundred-dollar bills. Even in prison he had it! You can strip him naked and burn his clothes, and next day he just reaches into his pocket, and there it is again!"

"You're stoned," Khoklov protested. "If he can do that, why didn't you just shoot him?"

"We wanted to at first, but he's too useful," Tamara said. "He's the best mechanic we've ever had here in Azerbaijan. It's a weird ability he has — he can fix anything! We just give him some wires and screws, and maybe some oil and a jackknife, and even rusty old wrecks start running again."

Sometimes he just stands *next* to a machine, and *frowns* at it, and it gets better right away! Isn't that so, Lekhi?"

"It's no big deal," Starlitz mumbled. "She's putting you on, ace."

"I know that," Khoklov said indulgently. "She talks just like Scheherazade. It's charming."

"No, it's true!" Tamara said. "That's exactly how he is! I'm not kidding, you know!" There was a leaden silence. Tamara laughed gaily. "But it doesn't matter, really. We don't care how strange he is, as long as he belongs to us."

It was almost dawn when they reached the airstrip. They fueled the plane as fast as they could. Even Tamara helped.

Khoklov helped Starlitz move the paint ladder. "I'll have to tell them I had engine trouble, and was forced to fly very slowly. To stay aloft so long and return safely to base — I think I just performed a superhuman technical feat!" Khoklov chuckled and elbowed Starlitz in the ribs. "Just like one of your so-called miracles, eh, Comrade Starlitz? It's amazing what nontechnical people will believe."

"Sure," Starlitz muttered. "Whatever works, man."

Khoklov climbed up into the cockpit. "I'll die happy now, Tamara," he shouted. "Save a place for me in one of those black-market cemetery plots." He slid the cockpit shut.

Starlitz started the tractor and expertly backed the Ilyushin-14 out of its hangar and onto the runway. He decoupled and drove back to the hangar.

Tamara stood at the hangar gate, her arms folded, watching the spy-plane climb. "Russians are so morbid," she said. "He's a very sweet boy, for KGB, but I don't trust him in our business. He's got Death written all over him." She shivered, and buttoned her jacket. "Besides, he might brag about me. . . . Get rid of him for me, Lekhi, there's a dear. Tell my husband that Captain Khoklov has a bad attitude. We'll find ourselves a different pilot. Someone who hasn't killed more people than I can count."

"O.K.," Starlitz said.

"Why doesn't daylight come?" Tamara said. "Those pills of his are making me really nervous. Am I talking too much? This is a spooky hour, isn't it? Predawn. 'Predawn attack'; that's what they always say in the newspapers. 'Predawn arrest.' Policemen love this time of day."

"You're wired," Starlitz told her. "Let's get in the bus. I'll drive you back to town."

"All right. That might be best." They got back inside. Starlitz threw it into gear and hit the gas.

They drove off. Out in a stubbled field, a large flock of crows was skirling about in confusion, cawing. They seemed reluctant to light on the earth.

Tamara fidgeted. She stuck her hands in the pockets of her jacket. Surprised, she pulled one out. It was full of foil-wrapped condoms.

"Oh look," she said. "He left me these. What a sweet gesture."

"That's a great jacket," Starlitz said.

"It's mine," she said irritably. "*Mine*, understand? I don't own much, you know. I just manage things, because of my husband's office. There's no security for us. Only power. And our power could all go, couldn't it? There've been purges before. So I don't want to bargain with the clothes on my back. Like I was some kind of labor-camp *zek*."

"I've got dollars," Starlitz wheedled.

She frowned. "Look, my jacket wouldn't even *fit* you. You must be crazy."

"I want it anyway," Starlitz said. "I'll be generous. C'mon."

"You're very weird," Tamara said suddenly. "You're from America, aren't you?"

Starlitz grinned broadly. "Don't be silly."

"Only Americans throw dollars around for no sane reason."

"Easy come, easy go," Starlitz shrugged. "C'mon, Tamara, let's do business."

"Are you CIA — is that it? If you are, why don't you go spy on Shevardnadze, or something? Go to Moscow and bug real Russians."

"Shevardnadze's a Georgian," Starlitz said. "Anyway, I like it right here. The local situation's really interesting. I want to see what happens when it comes apart."

"You *must* be an American, because you're making me feel really *paranoid*!" Tamara shouted. "I have an awful feeling something really bad is about to happen! I'm going to call my husband on this radio. I need to know what's going on! I don't care what you are, but just shut up and keep driving. That's an order!"

She tried to raise the palace. There was no answer.

"Try the military band," Starlitz suggested.

The military band was crackling with traffic.

"Sounds like some of those 'predawn raids' you were talking about," Starlitz said, interested. "They're a little behind schedule, I guess." The sun was just rising. Starlitz killed the headlights. The truck topped a hill.

A long line of civilian cars was approaching the Estate.

Tamara dropped the microphone in horror. "Look at those cars!" she said, staring through the tinted windshield. "Only one kind of stupid cop drives around disguised in those stupid brown sedans! It's the DCMSP!"

"Which cops are those, exactly?" Starlitz asked.

"Department to Combat the Misappropriation of Socialist Property," Tamara said. "They've never dared to come near here before. . . . They're the income people, the accountants, the nastiest little cops there are. Once they get their teeth in you, it's all over!"

Starlitz drove past the convoy. The brown cars, with their packed, burr-headed Russian accountants, sped on without a pause.

"They're not stopping this bus," he said. "They didn't recognize it."

"They're not from Azerbaijan. We bribed all the locals. They're outside people," Tamara said. "These cops are Gorbachev's!" She slammed her fist against the window. "He's betrayed us! Stabbed us in the back! That hypocrite bastard! Where does his wife get those fancy furs and shoes, I wonder!"

"Earned 'em with her salary as an art historian," Starlitz said.

Tamara wiped bitterly at her kohl-smeared eyes. "It's so unfair! All we wanted was a decent life here! Those stupid Russians: they have a system that would make a donkey laugh, and now they want to *purify* it! God, I hate them!"

"What do you wanna do now?" Starlitz said. "Go back and stand on your doorstep?"

"No," she said grimly. "We'll have to bend to the almighty wind from Moscow. We'll wait, though, and we'll be back as soon as they give up trying. It won't take long. The new god will fail."

"O.K., good," Starlitz said. "In the meantime, I'll just keep driving. I love this bus. It's great."

"Gorbachev won't dare try us publicly," Tamara said, gnawing one nail. "I'll bet they simply retire my husband. Maybe even *promote* him. Some post that's safe and completely meaningless. Like Environment, or Consumer Affairs."

"Yeah," Starlitz said. "This is the new era, right? They won't shoot

Party bosses. Makes the Politburo nervous."

"That's right," Tamara said.

"But it's gonna be tough on your underlings. The people with no big-time strings to pull."

Tamara arched her brows. "Oh well . . . most of them are lousy Armenians anyway. Born thieves . . . we were always careful to hire Armenians whenever we could."

Starlitz nodded. "Well, I held up my end of the system," he said. "Got the plane launched. Got the job done. The rest of it's not my lookout." He pulled over to the side of the road with a gentle hiss of airbrakes. "Looks like we part company here. So long, Tamara. It's been real."

She stared at him. "This is my bus!"

"Not anymore. Sorry."e. So long, Tamara. It's been real."

She was stunned for a moment. Then her face went bleak. "You can't escape, you know. The police will stop you. There will be roadblocks."

"It's gonna be *chaos*," Starlitz said. "The cops will have their hands full, or I miss my guess. But the cops won't stop the chairman's bus — old habits don't die that quick. So I'll just wing it. Improvise." Starlitz rubbed his stubbled chin. "I'll dress up as a paramedic, I guess. Get a Red Cross armband. Nobody stops rescue workers, when there's really big trouble."

"I'm not leaving my bus!" Tamara said, grabbing the armrest. "You can't do this to me!"

Starlitz reached behind his back and produced the Afghan pistol. "Just a technicality," he said, not bothering to point it at her. "Open the door and get out, O.K.?"

Tamara got out. She stood at the muddy side of the road in her high heels. The bus drove off.

Seconds ticked by. A brutal tide of shock coursed through the landscape. Trees whipped at the air; the earth rippled. Tamara was knocked from her feet. She clutched at the roadside as a deep, subterranean rumble seeped up through her hands and knees.

The bus stopped dead, fishtailing. She saw it sway and rattle on its shocks, until the tremor slowed and, finally, came to a grinding end.

Then the bus turned and raced back toward her. Tamara got to her feet, trembling, wiping mechanically at the mud on her hands.

Starlitz pulled over. He opened the door and leaned out. "I forgot the jacket," he said.

Mike Resnick, best known here for his fine Kirinyaga stories, turns to something lighter, viz, a literary collaboration between Marvin Piltch and the greatest ghost writer of all time.

Frankie the Spook

By Mike Resnick

DRAWING HER CLOSE to him while breathing heavily with unspent passion, he slid his hand down the small of her back, around to her rib cage, up under her. . . .
The image of Sir Francis Bacon stopped reading and winced.

"This is really quite dreadful," he announced firmly.

"Really?" asked Marvin Piltch, staring unhappily at the face in his computer.

Bacon nodded. "Even worse than the last batch. You have set a new standard in ineptitude."

Marvin sighed. "I was afraid of that."

"And this reference to a boob," continued Bacon. "What, exactly, is a boob?"

"A tit."

"I beg your pardon?"

"A female breast."

"According to my dictionary programs, it must be a very unintelligent female breast to be termed a boob."

"Well," said Marvin with a shrug, "when you get right down to cases, I suppose it is."

"It doesn't make any sense," continued Bacon. "What slang do you use for the elbow? Do you call it a fool?"

"Not very often," admitted Marvin.

"Ah," said Bacon. "Then you think that the elbow is more intelligent than the breast?"

Marvin shrugged again. "I have to admit it's not a subject that I've given a lot of thought to."

"I know. In fact, if there is a subject anywhere in the universe that you have given a lot of thought to, you certainly haven't incorporated it in your writings."

"Actually, there *is* one subject that I've given considerable thought to."

"Oh?" said Bacon, arching an eyebrow. "And what is that?"

Marvin smiled. "You."

"Somehow I foresaw that the conversation would eventually take this course," said Bacon sardonically.

"Then you know what I'm going to ask you?"

"Certainly."

Marvin leaned forward and squinted at Bacon's image on his computer screen. "Will you do it?"

"Will the greatest writer in the history of the human race ghostwrite your pitiful little novel?" sneered Bacon. "Absolutely not."

"But you ghosted for Shakespeare!" protested Marvin. "That's why I had my computer assemble you."

"Marvin, go write limpware and leave me alone."

"It's called software."

"Whatever it's called, it is obvious to me that you were meant to work with computers. Your ignorance of the world at large is superseded only by your ignorance of the English language."

"That's why I need you."

"No."

"But I've got a contract."

"No."

"And it's got penalty clauses for coming in late."

"Then submit it on time."

"And if the editor rejects it, I've got to return the advance."

"What is that to me?"

"If I have to return the advance, I'll have to pawn the computer to raise the money."

"Good," said Bacon. "Then I'll soon be speaking with someone who has a serious interest in *exchanging* ideas rather than stealing them."

"I didn't steal anything!" snapped Marvin.

"Marvin, I hate to be blunt, but you haven't had an original idea in your nondescript life." Bacon grimaced. "At least Shakespeare knew he wanted to write plays."

"And you helped him."

"Helped him?" repeated Bacon furiously. "Who do you think wrote all those plays?" His image made an effort to recover its self-control. "The man was a fool, a complete and utter fool! To his dying day, he never understood why I wouldn't write *Henry IX*! And yet, even now, centuries later, that dimwit gets all the credit for my work, my creativity, my genius — and you have the gall to ask me to become a ghostwriter again?"

"I didn't know you were so bitter," said Marvin.

"Did you know that that moron wanted to set *Troilus and Cressida* in Rome?"

"Rome's a very pretty city, I'm told," offered Marvin.

"Bah!" muttered Bacon. "Turn me off."

"I put you together, and you're staying right here until you help me out of this situation. The novel is due in two weeks."

"Rome's a very pretty city, I'm told," echoed Bacon sarcastically. "Perhaps you can hide there from your creditors."

"You're not being very responsive," complained Marvin.

"You absolutely refuse to deactivate me?"

"I'm sorry," said Marvin. "But yes, I refuse."

Bacon sighed in resignation. "I'm certain that I will regret having asked, but how did a literary maladroït like you ever receive a commission to write a novel in the first place?"

"My ex-wife's cousin is an editor. I got the assignment while we were still married."

"Anyone who buys an unwritten novel from you deserves exactly what he gets," said Bacon. "Which, in my professional opinion, will be nothing."

"But I can't return the advance," whined Marvin. "It's already spent."

"A Shakespearean tragedy," said Bacon mockingly.

"What do you want?"

"Peace and quiet."

"I mean, to write the novel?"

"Go away and leave me alone."

"I can't. I have no one else to turn to."

"You should have thought of that before taking on such an awesome responsibility. After all, not every artiste can achieve the high literary standard required of . . . what was the name of this *magnum opus*?"

"*Meter Maids in Bondage*."

Bacon grinned. "Do have fun."

"I'm begging you!" said Marvin desperately.

"And I'm refusing you."

"Name your price."

"What possible use have I for money in my present condition?" replied Bacon.

"What *can* you use?"

"Solitude. Deactivate the computer."

"I can't. Name something else."

Bacon stared out at him for a long moment, his eyes narrowed, his lean fingers rubbing his chin thoughtfully.

"If I agree to write this book for you, I will want a favor in return."

"Anything," promised Marvin.

"I intend to write my autobiography, which will end the controversy concerning the authorship of Shakespeare's plays once and for all. It will be your obligation to make certain that it is published and publicized throughout the world, until every new edition of Shakespeare names me as the true author."

"That could take decades."

"I'm more than four hundred years old," replied Bacon. "I have a few decades to spare."

"But I don't," protested Marvin.

"It was nice knowing you, Marvin. Be sure to turn out the light when you leave the room."

"You wouldn't settle for a nice plaster bust of you in the local art museum?"

"Good-bye, Marvin."

"How about a holographic poster? I've got a friend who manufactures them."

Bacon merely stared at him and made no reply.

"All right, all right," said Marvin with a deep sigh. "It's a deal."

"I have no way of forcing you to keep your promise," said Bacon, "but as there's a God in Heaven, I'll haunt you every day and night of your life if you should break your word to me."

"I said I'd do it."

"All right," replied Bacon. "I'm going to need a little backgrounding before I start writing."

"It's just a sex novel."

"It won't be when I get through with it."

Marvin shrugged. "All right. Anything you need, just ask. If I don't have it, I'll get it."

"Let's start with some information."

"Such as?"

"What is a meter maid?"

BACON FINISHED ghosting the novel in nine days. Marvin changed eleven words that he didn't understand — the only eleven corrections the stunned copy editor made before sending it off to the typesetter — and then decided to take a month off before looking for a new way to make a living and fend off his creditors. As it turned out, he had to wait only nineteen days.

"It's a hit!"

"Plays are hits. Books are blockbusters," Bacon corrected him.

"Well, whatever it is, we're rich!" Marvin paused. "By the way, how the hell did you learn a word like 'blockbuster'? They didn't have blockbusters back in your time."

"I'm cooped up in here all day and all night with a bunch of word processing programs," answered Bacon. "So, having nothing better to do with my time, I read the dictionaries."

"Oh," said Marvin. "Well, getting back to the news, we actually got reviewed in the *New York Times*! They called it a mock-Elizabethan erotic masterpiece, and said it was even more biting satirical than *Candide*."

"It was more bitingly satirical than *Candide* halfway through page 1," said Bacon contemptuously. "And there was nothing 'mock' about it." He paused. "What else?"

"They say I'm a genius, and that I've — we've — done things that have never been done with erotica before. The few who don't mention Shakespeare" — Bacon's image winced — "keep comparing me to Voltaire!"

"A decidedly minor talent," sniffed Bacon. "Still, what do critics know?"

"We're Number One on the best-seller list, and we've gone back to press six times in two weeks."

"Only six?" said Bacon. "I overestimated the intelligence of the American reading public."

"Yeah?" retorted Marvin. "Well, almost 3 million members of that public have forked over their money to read an original novel by Marvin Piltch!" Suddenly he shifted his weight uncomfortably. "With some slight assistance by Sir Francis Bacon, of course."

"Some slight assistance?" roared Bacon. "Why, you self-centered, egotistical —"

"Watch your blood pressure," said Marvin.

"I don't have any blood pressure, you imbecile!" raged Bacon. "I'm a computer simulacrum!" He paused to catch his electronic breath. "Such ingratitude! At least it took Shakespeare five or six plays before he convinced himself that he was the author!"

"I apologize."

"You had bloody well better apologize!"

"I do."

"Humbly," demanded Bacon.

"Humbly," agreed Marvin.

"That's better."

"We're friends again?"

"We were never friends."

"But at least we're not enemies?"

"I suppose not," said Bacon.

"Good," said Marvin. "Because we've got work to do."

"I have work to do."

"That's what I meant."

"I will require no help whatsoever with my autobiography."

Marvin shifted his weight again.

"Uh. . ."

"Yes?"

"I'm afraid you're going to have to put your autobiography on the back burner for a few weeks."

"The back burner?"

"On hold."

"English is an elastic language, but it does have its limitations," said Bacon. "Do try to remain within them."

"What I'm saying is that we owe another novel."

"What are you talking about?"

"The contract had an option clause. My wife's cousin decided to exercise it."

"Nonsense. He cannot force you to write another book."

"Well," said Marvin hesitantly, "it wasn't exactly a matter of force. . ."

"Explain yourself," demanded Bacon coldly.

"He offered me a million-dollar advance, 15 percent straight royalties, 60 percent of all subsidiary rights, and —"

"You've accepted payment for another novel?"

Marvin nodded.

"Well, I certainly hope you enjoy writing it."

"I . . . ah . . . thought we might collaborate again."

"We didn't collaborate the first time."

"You know what I mean."

"I know precisely what you mean," said Bacon distastefully. "You want me to write *Girl Scouts in Leather*."

"Great title," said Marvin admiringly. "But no, that wasn't what I had in mind."

"What you had in mind is of no interest to me."

"Come on," said Marvin. "A deal's a deal."

"What are you talking about?" demanded Bacon. "I fulfilled my end of the bargain."

"Well, not officially."

"I wrote the book."

"You had to help me fulfill the contract," continued Marvin. "Well, the contract now calls for another novel."

"You mentioned nothing about a contract," protested Bacon. "You asked me to write a novel. I wrote it — and with the absolute brilliance

of which only I am capable. My obligation to you is finished."

"I was afraid you were going to become an attitude case," said Marvin with a sigh.

"And I was certain that you would break your word. It appears that each of us shall have his expectations fulfilled," retorted Bacon.

"Well," said Marvin with a sign of resignation, "it was probably beyond you anyway."

"What was?"

"The book I signed for."

"Don't be insulting. If *Meter Maids in Bondage* proves anything, it proves that no form of erotica is beyond my talents to attack and upgrade."

"Yeah, but this one's for his science fiction line."

"Science fiction?"

"Well, fantasy, anyway. It's an alternate-universe story."

"What is an alternate universe?"

"One in which history happened differently," explained Marvin. "It might be about a world in which Germany won World War II, or Atlantis didn't sink, or Jesus wasn't crucified, or where Shakespeare is credited with ghosting all your writings."

"Where that toad ghosted my work?" repeated Bacon incredulously. "This really is too much to bear!" Suddenly he stared intently at Marvin. "Is that what you propose to write?"

"No."

"You're quite sure?"

"Quite."

Bacon glared at him distrustfully. "What is the subject of your book, then?"

"Well, I had heard you mention it, and it was the first thing that popped into my mind, and —"

"What is it?"

"The life of King Henry IX."

"That's not my idea, you fool!" snapped Bacon. "It's that idiot Shakespeare's."

"Well, if you feel you can't handle it. . . ."

"It's not that I *can't*; it's that I *won't*." Bacon was absolutely motionless for a moment, his eyes fixed on some distant point that only he could see. "For one thing, I'd have to write Queen Elizabeth out of the history

books." He paused, and then snickered. "I never did like her very much anyway." He seemed lost in contemplation for a long moment. "Actually, I could turn it out in less time than the last one, since I'd be working within my own *milieu*. . . ."

"Will you?"

"No."

"You've got decades to spare, remember?" urged Marvin. "What's a week between friends?"

"We are not friends."

"Collaborators, then."

"Collaborators?" snapped Bacon. "If you think I'd allow you to write a single word of *Henry IX*, you subliterate anthropoid. . . ."

IT SOLD 17 million copies worldwide, and was made into a megahit movie starring Burt Reynolds as Henry and Bubbles Vancouver as Betty Jean Plantagenet (a role created expressly for the film).

More to the point, it won the Hugo, the Pulitzer, and even the prestigious Harold Robbins Award.

"Listen to this!" enthused Marvin as he read the reviews to the simulacrum inside his computer. "The *New York Review of Books* says, 'It's as if the Bard himself had taken pen to paper.'"

"I thought time was supposed to take care of critics," muttered Bacon. "All it really seems to do is compound their ignorance."

"And *Publisher's Weekly* says, 'There are a few turns of phrase that Shakespeare himself might have envied,'" continued Marvin.

"Shakespeare again!" snorted Bacon. "That dolt would envy a phrase that concisely asked directions to the men's room!"

"Don't take it so personally."

"Four centuries later and he's *still* getting credit for my work! How would you take it?"

Marvin shrugged. "I don't know. Why don't you write something that doesn't read like Shakespeare?"

"A complete, well-constructed sentence doesn't read like Shakespeare!"

"Well, then, write something that doesn't read so much like yourself."

"I'm never writing again, thank you."

"Well, if you don't think you can disguise your voice. . . ."

"Of course I can disguise my voice," said Bacon defensively.

Marvin shook his head. "I doubt it. You wrote a smut novel and a fantasy, and the critics still compare you to Shakespeare."

"They are fools."

"They're your audience," Marvin corrected him. "And you can't hide your identity from them."

"That's what I get for being a ghostwriter in the first place. If I'd written the tragedies under my own name. . . ."

"But you didn't."

"No, I didn't," said Bacon with a sigh.

"And now," continued Marvin carefully, "if you don't manage to create a new literary *persona*, everything you write will always be credited to Shakespeare's influence."

"This is intolerable!"

"I thought you might feel that way," said Marvin. "So I signed another contract."

"No more fantasies or erotica," said Bacon. "It has to be something totally different."

"A hard-boiled detective story," announced Marvin.

"I don't think I've ever read one of those."

"I'll run the scanner over some Hammett and Cain and Chandler before I go to bed tonight."

"They are the three exemplars of the form?"

"No. They're three hard-boiled mystery writers."

Boil and Bubble won the Edgar, the Shamus, and even the coveted Jacqueline Suzanne Memorial Trophy (for Positive Contributions to the American Cultural Scene). It also sold 21 million copies, and was made into a feature film, a television series, a computer game, a role-playing game, and a chain of soup kitchens.

"An almost perfect melding of high Shakespearean tragedy and down-to-earth Chanderlesque drama," read Marvin, holding up the *New York Times*.

"Again?" shrieked Bacon. "Am I never to be rid of that meddlesome fool?"

"You're getting on my nerves," said Marvin. "I'm the best-selling author of the decade, except maybe for Fritz Hauer, and all you can do is complain."

"I've read Fritz Hauer's works," retorted Bacon. "They're trifles, nothing but trifles. They can't begin to compare to what I've written."

"Then why don't you relax and feel triumphant or something, instead of harping about Shakespeare all the time?" complained Marvin.

"Don't you understand? The credit should be *mine*, not his! My work is revered throughout the world, but it is *his* name that is worshipped, not mine. Don't you realize what that can do to a sensitive artistic spirit?"

"*Boil and Bubble* outsold his entire body of work five-to-one last month. Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

"Not if every word, every precise turn of phrase, every poetic fantasy that I create, is to be credited to *his* influence," responded Bacon.

"You are getting to be a regular pain in the ass," said Marvin.

"You can always turn me off and write these masterpieces yourself," said Bacon with a nasty smile.

"Don't push your luck, fella. I may just do that one of these days."

"I, for one, would thank you. Then I could return to that delightful void in which Shakespeare's name is never mentioned."

"Not quite yet," said Marvin. "I just signed to do a michener."

"A michener? Is that like a mystery?"

Marvin shook his head. "No. You choose some obscure city or country, spend three hundred pages making up its history, and then follow five or six generations of your hero's family. They're very popular."

"I have it!" cried Bacon. "I'll write of my own family, and then the world will know who Shakespeare really was!"

"I thought the notion might appeal to you," said Marvin with a sly smile.

The Bard and the Ghost was Marvin's only artistic failure, though it sold out its first three printings prior to its official release date.

"Too farfetched," said the *Washington Post*.

"Suspending disbelief long enough to read *Henry IX* was one thing," added the *Saturday Review*, "but when Mr. Piltch asks us to go along with the ridiculous fancy that Sir Francis Bacon actually wrote Shakespeare's plays. . . ."

"Unbelievable," said the *New York Times* in the shortest book review on record.

Bacon was beside himself with frustration. His sole topic of conversa-

tion was his contempt for Shakespeare, and he soon reached the point where Marvin would have hired him a psychiatrist if he had known any who specialized in the treatment of monomaniacal computer simulacrum.

Then came the fateful day that Marvin, in an effort to bolster his flagging reputation, agreed to appear on a television talk show with his only serious literary rival, Fritz Hauer, whose rise to the top of the sales charts had been as meteoric as Marvin's own.

He was waiting in the Mauve Room prior to walking out on stage, when a young man with thick glasses, an ill-fitting tan suit, and white stockings peeking up over his custom-made shoes, entered the room. He stared at Marvin for a moment, then took a step closer to him.

"Marvin Piltch?" he asked hesitantly.

"Yes."

"I thought I recognized the Hawaiian shirt; it's the same one you wore on the cover of *Newsweek* last month. Very tasteful." The young man extended his hand. "I'm Fritz Hauer."

"Please to meet you," said Marvin.

"Mind if I sit down?"

"Be my guest."

Hauer sat down and continued to stare at Marvin for a few moments.

"Is something wrong?" asked Marvin.

"No. I was just curious."

"About what?"

Hauer shot a quick look at the door to make sure it was closed.

"Well, I'll never get an answer if I don't ask. Just between you and me, who's your spook?"

"My what?" said Marvin.

"Your ghost."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Come on, Marvin," said Hauer confidentially. "You're my only rival on the literary scene. I've studied you thoroughly. I know all about your background, your education, your cultural upbringing. You have no more business writing a classic than I have. We're computer hackers, not writers."

"Speak for yourself," said Marvin defensively.

"I will," said Hauer. "I can't ask for your confidence if I don't give you

mine." He paused. "You know how people keep saying I write with Rabelaisian wit, even when I'm doing Westerns?" Hauer grinned. "That's because I've got Rabelais in my box."

"Really?"

Hauer nodded. "Who's yours? Shakespeare?"

"Is that the way they read to you?"

"Who reads novels? That's what the reviews all say."

"Actually, it's Francis Bacon," admitted Marvin. "He wrote all of Shakespeare's plays."

"So you've got an experienced spook ghosting for you?" said Hauer. "Boy, I wish to hell mine was! He's very unhappy about the situation."

"Oh?" asked Marvin, suddenly interested.

"Yeah. He's always complaining about Simulacrum Rights, and he keeps wanting to write orgy scenes into the cowboy stories."

"Francis writes exactly what I tell him to write," said Marvin.

"I envy you," said Hauer.

"Don't. He's very difficult to get along with. He gets furious every time the critics compare his stuff to Shakespeare."

"You'd think that after being a ghostwriter for so many centuries, he'd be used to it by now," said Hauer.

"It just seems to make him madder," replied Marvin. "I'll be honest with you — I'm thinking of announcing my retirement. I don't know how many more novels I can get him to write."

"Who ever heard of a writer who doesn't want to write?"

"Oh, he wants to write — but he's obsessed with this Shakespeare business. I have to appeal to his vanity to get him to do any contract work at all!"

"I see your problem," sympathized Hauer. "But still . . . a spook who's willing to write something besides orgies. It must be wonderful!"

"I'd settle for orgies, if he was just a little more pleasant."

"Who needs pleasant? Just lock him in a room and let him write. Hell, Rabelais wastes so much time telling dirty jokes that I've missed my last two deadlines."

"But is he pleasant?"

"Pleasant as the day is long," said Hauer. "Just lazy." He paused. "I mean, it isn't as if he's got anything else to do inside that damned box."

Marvin stared intently at Hauer, who stared back at him.

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" said Marvin at last.

"A trade?" suggested Hauer with a grin.

"Why not? They're ghostwriters. Who else would have to know?"

"What the hell. It's a deal!"

"Fine," said Marvin, shaking on it. "Now let 'em say I write like an Elizabethan!"

"Hi, Frankie," said Hauer. "Welcome to your new home."

Bacon eyed him suspiciously.

"It's O.K., really it is," said Hauer. "Marvin told me all about you, and we're gonna get along just fine."

"Why do I doubt that?"

"Beats the hell out of me. But as a gesture of goodwill, take a look at this."

He held a paper up before the screen.

"What is it?"

"A contract for a novel about professional football."

"I know nothing about football."

"Neither does Shakespeare."

"I *am* Shakespeare, you dolt!"

"What I mean is, since football is totally beyond your experience, and all your research will be couched in twentieth-century language, you ought to be able to get out from under Shakespeare's — uh, your own — shadow once and for all, and be recognized as a truly original literary genius."

"You know, there's a twisted kind of logic to that," mused Bacon.

"Then you'll do it?"

"I'll consider it."

"You brought the reviews with you?" asked Bacon.

"Yes," said Hauer.

"They didn't compare my writing to Shakespeare this time?"

"No."

"Finally!"

"I can hardly wait. Let me hear them."

"You're sure?"

"Of course I'm sure," said Bacon. "I've waited four hundred years to be acknowledged as my own man."

"O.K.," said Hauer.

"Start with the *New York Review of Books*."

"*The Green Bay Massacre*, Fritz Hauer's latest novel, begins with a brilliant conceit, but soon degenerates into a slavish imitation of our foremost American writer, the incomparable Marvin Piltch."

"What?"

"Well, at least they're not accusing you of being Shakespeare anymore."

"Shut up!"

"Do you want to hear the rest of it or not?"

"No. Read me a different one."

"*The Green Bay Massacre*, Fritz Hauer's heavy-handed homage to the works of Marvin Piltch. . . ."

"This can't be happening!" cried Bacon.

Hauer stared at Bacon's image with some compassion, then shrugged. "What the hell — once a spook, always a spook," he said as he walked to the door.

Bacon's last plaintive scream seemed to linger in the dusty air of the room long after Hauer had left to sign a new contract with his publisher.



"Before I grant your wish to become a size 7, you should know that rapid weight loss is rarely permanent."

Philip Jose Farmer is primarily a novelist these days, but he has long been an F&SF contributor, beginning with his Father Carmody stories in the 1950's. It's a pleasure to have him back with this explosive story, his first here in more than ten years.

One Down, One to Go

By Philip José Farmer

THIS DAY, FOR Charlie Roth, would always be the Day of the Locust.

Twenty-nine years old, a Welfare Department employee, he was now an agent of its new branch, the General Office of Special Restitution. Every workday had been a bad day since he had entered the WD. But in times to come, he would liken today to the destruction wrought in a few hours by the sky-blackening and all-devouring swarms of the desert locust, *Schistocerca gregaria*.

Charlie Roth, attaché case filled with sterilization authorization forms, walked up a staircase in Building 13 of the Newstreet Housing Authority. He was headed toward the apartment of Riches Dott, unmarried mother of many. For the moment, his guilt and tension were gone. His mind was on Laura, the seventh child of Riches Dott. Laura was the only one of the fifteen children for whom he now had any hope. An older brother who had a high IQ and an intense but low ambition was a lifer in Joliet Penitentiary. An older sister had had a remarkable mathematical

talent, long ago whisked away in the smoke of crack and snark.

Advising and aiding Laura was not part of his official mission. But perhaps he could be someone to talk to who really cared about her. He would give her money out of his own shallow pocket if that would make firmer a resolve that must be shaking despite her strong will.

Yet he himself might need help soon. Big help.

Ever since his wife, five months pregnant, had left him, he had been getting more and more easily angered. But their separation was only a lesser part of the steam-hot wrath he could just barely control. The larger part troubled him whether he was sleeping or awake.

His mind was like a water strider. One of those bugs (family Gerridae) that walked on the still waters of ponds. Its specially modified back legs skimmed the surface tension, that single layer of molecules that was a skin on the pond to the strider. The legs of his mind, an arthropod Jesus that had suddenly lost its faith in its powers, were poking now and then through the skin.

"I'm going to sink and then drown! I wanted to save all these wretches because I loved them! Now I hate them!"

Here he was, God help him, a would-be entomologist who could not master chemistry and mathematics. He had given up his goal before he even got his M.A. A man who loves the study of bugs, what does he do when he can't do that?

He becomes a social worker.

As he turned onto the landing, he heard quick-paced footsteps above him. He paused, and Laura Dott appeared. She smiled when she saw him, said, "Hello, Mr. Roth," and clattered down the steps toward him. She was in the uniform of a waitress at a local fast-food restaurant. Just turned eighteen, Laura had been removed from her mother's welfare dependency roll. Though still living with her mother, she was making straight A's in high school and working five days a week from 4:00 P.M. until midnight, minimum wage.

She had always been an honor student. How she could have done that while living in the pressure-cooker pandemonium of her mother's apartment, Charlie did not understand. Equally mysterious was how she had managed to stay unpregnant, drug-free, and sane. Some other youths in this area had done the same, but their mother wasn't Riches.

"Hi, Laura," he said. "I'd like to talk to you."

She went past him, her head turned toward him. She was slim and long-legged, and her skin was as close to black as brown could get. She flashed a beautiful smile with teeth white and regular but long and thick.

"Busy, busy, busy, Mr. Roth. If it's important, see me during my mid-break, eight o'clock. Sorry."

She was gone. Charlie sighed and went on up the steps. At the top he saw Amin Ketcher coming down the hall from the staircase at the opposite end. He reached the door of Mrs. Dott's apartment before Charlie got there, and leaned against the wall by the door.

If he was waiting for Laura, he was too late. Probably held up completing a deal: crack, zoomers, blasters, and snark. The bastard. She's told him time and again to get lost. He's street-smart and shadow-elusive, but a loser: at twenty, the known father of twelve children, boasting of it, yet not giving a penny to support them.

So far he had refused to sign the form authorizing his sterilization. Why should he? He had the cash for a fleet of new cars. Moreover, the ability to knock up a horde of teenagers was, to him, one of the main proofs of his manhood. But they had been pushovers. He wanted Laura Dott because she had only contempt and disgust for him, though she knew better than to insult him verbally.

Charlie strode down the hall. "Hey, a Charlie Charlie," Ketcher said. "The General Office of Special Reestituutiion man. The white gooser."

He inclined his handsome copper-colored face to look down on Charlie's six feet from his six feet six inches. His oil-dripping kinky hair was cut in the current "castle" style: high crenellated walls and six-inch-high turrets. A silver-banded plastic nosebone, huge gold earrings, and a tick-tacktoe diagram, the symbol of his gang, cut by a razor into each cheek, gave him the barbaric appearance he desired. He wore a sequined purple jacket and jeans overlaid with battery-powered electric lights and neon-tube rock slogans. These flashed on and off while the yang-n-yin music of the EAT SHIT AND LIVE band played from a hundred microphone-buttons on his garments.

The enormous pupils of his glistening black eyes could have been caused by belladonna, used by many youths. But his faint gunpowdery odor told Charlie that he was on snark. The latest designer drug, its effects and chemical traces vanished within five minutes after being used. The narcs had to test a suspect on the spot to get the evidence to convict

the user. That was possible only if a van carrying the heavy and intricate test equipment was at once available.

Also, every tiny bag of snark held two easily breakable vials. If the carrier was caught by the police and he had enough time, he threw the bag against anything hard. Bag, snark, and vials went up in a microexplosion. No drug residue was left.

Charlie passed by Ketcher and stopped in front of the door. He could hear the blast of the TV set and the yelling of children through the door. Something crashed loudly, and Riches's high-pitched voice drilled through the plastic.

"I swear, Milton, you knock that chair over again, I slap you sillier'n you already be!"

The doorbell had long been out of order. Charlie knocked hard three times on the door.

"Old fat-ass Riches ain't going to sign," Ketcher said. "You wasting your breath. Or you waiting till Laura come home from school? You wasting your time there, too, Charlie. She ain't interested in no small white dong."

"You paleolithic atavism!" Charlie said, snarling. "You've been harassing Laura long enough to know she'd sooner screw an ape with diarrhea than you. Anyway, you mush-brained snarker, she isn't going to be around much longer. She'll be getting out of this shithole and away from corpse worms like you. Very, very soon, I promise you."

Ketcher stepped closer to Charlie. His enormous eyes were as empty of intelligence as a wasp's.

"What that mean, paley . . . whatever? You making a racial remark, you blue-eyed shithead? I turn your skinny ass in to the Gooser Office. And what you mean, Laura gonna be gone?"

Charlie regretted losing his cool, and so warning Ketcher that Laura would soon be out of his reach.

The door started to swing open. The TV roared, and the children's voices shrilled like a horde of cicadas.

"You're extinct," Charlie said. "A fly in amber still kicking because you don't know you're dead. Laura'd sooner eat a live cockroach than let you get into her pants."

He stepped through the doorway and closed it while Ketcher yelled, "I'll cut you when you come out, you white motherfucker!"

Sure you'll cut me, Charlie thought. You know I just have to use

Riches's phone, and the troops stationed down on the corner will be up here. If they find the knife on you, you go straight to a prison work camp.

Though often in the family room, Charlie had now been admitted only because Riches had not heard his knock. One of the ten children living there had happened to be close to the door. He was optimist enough at the age of six to take the chocolate bar Charlie offered and not wonder what it was going to cost him later. But he slid the bar inside his urine-yellowed jockey shorts, his only garment, before his siblings caught sight of it.

Mrs. Dott answered his greeting with a scowl, and then stared straight at the screen.

Charlie, sighing, pulled three stapled sheets from his attaché case. This visit, he was required only to read to her Paragraph 3 from Form WD-GOSSR C-6392-T. Though he knew that Riches probably could not hear his voice above the blaring commercial or the shouting and screaming children, he did not care.

"... available to all American citizens (see Paragraph 5 for age, mental, and physical exceptions and restrictions) REGARDLESS OF RACE, GENDER OR RELIGION. Guaranteed free: any new 100% American-made automobile, motorcycle, or pickup truck with 100 gallons of gasoline or diesel oil or alcohol, ten quarts of motor oil, a year's license plate, one year's warranty (see Paragraph 4.d for exceptions) and casualty insurance (see Paragraph 4.e for exceptions and restrictions). . . ."

Before he could get to the section dealing with the freedom of the government from lawsuits, Riches shrieked, "I told you time and again! Ain't nobody gonna mess around with my body!"

She settled back in the stained, torn, and broken-sprung sofa. Riches looks like a huge queen bee swollen with eggs, Charlie thought.

Despite the anger twisting her face, her gaze was fixed on the soap opera unfolding its story as slowly as the wings of a just-molted dragonfly.

Holy humping Jesus! Charlie thought. She's borne sixteen children. Had clap three times. Syph twice. It's a miracle she's escaped AIDS. She doesn't really understand the connection between sexual intercourse and venereal disease, though it's often been explained to her. All those babies have drained the calcium from her bones, spiders sucking out the juice, leaving her toothless and with a widow's hump.

Don't mess around with her body?

Though he wasn't going to change her mind, he had to make his

request this final time, then report the failure. The big praying-mantis eyes of Junkers, his boss, would get deadlier and colder. He'd shout, "How you expect this office to keep up its quotas if you piss out on me?"

"Mrs. Dott," Charlie said, "all but six in this building have signed up, and I'm sure most of those will eventually come through. You're forty-five. The cutoff date is forty-six. Why throw all that money away? Chances are high you can't have any more babies, anyway."

Suddenly she looked smug and sly. Patting her anthill stomach, she said, "You think I be too old to have any more? Wrong, Charlie. Got me another. She got one, too."

She pointed at thirteen-year-old Crystal, watching TV.

Her smile became even slier. "The law say Crystal can't sign up with you goosers 'less I say she can till she fifteen. No way!"

She did not look at him as he walked away. Nor did she seem to notice that he was lingering by the door. The dusty wall mirror showed his light red hair and pale and grim face. The dark circles around his eyes looked like Sioux smoke rings signaling for help. His guts hurt as if wasp larvae had hatched inside him and were eating their way out.

Why? What he was doing was rational and humanitarian. It was not just for the good of the people as a whole, though it was that, too. It was also for the good of the people at whom the missions were directed, and it involved no force or cruelty, none that was apparent, anyway.

He saw a cockroach, *Blatta orientalis*, inevitable companion of dirt and colleague of poverty, scuttle out from beneath an end of Riches's sofa. It seized a potato-chip fragment and shot back into the darkness under the sofa.

The piece contained an antifertility drug harmless to humans. Charlie thought that 99.9 percent of the cockroaches might be made infertile. But 0.1. percent would survive because they had mutated to resist the drug. From that would come billions.

He went into the hallway. Ketcher was alone with a youth, an obvious customer. Seeing Charlie, both went down the stairs. A faint acrid odor like battlefield smoke hung in the hall. Charlie felt as if he had gone through a firefight. He was trembling slightly. The hallway with its garbage cans, its dusty light bulbs, and its hot, unmoving air seemed to shift a little. Somewhat dizzy, he leaned against the scabrous, once-green wall for support.

What he was doing was for the best. How many times had he told himself that? The welfare recipients were in an economic-social elevator, its cables cut, falling faster and faster, nothing but disaster at the bottom for them — and for all citizens, since what happens to a part always affects the whole. At the same time, their numbers were increasing geometrically, far out of proportion to the rest of the population. Misery, hopelessness, disease, malnutrition, violence, and deep ignorance were also expanding.

The Ronn-Eagan legislation had not passed without vehement, and even violent, opposition, especially from some religious groups. But the nonreligious reaction to the excesses of the last three decades of the previous century was very strong. And though the law had made already burdensome taxes much heavier, it did promise an eventual lightening of the tax load and a large reduction in the welfare populations. But the vehicle-making, insurance, and petroleum industries, and the businesses dependent on these, were booming.

Someday the welfare problem (which also encompassed a part of the crime-drug problem) would be a small one. Why, then, did he have these dreams in which he strode down a very narrow and twilit hallway with no end? The doors ahead of him were open, but he slammed them shut as he passed.

"Charlie Roth! A ghost among spooks!"

Only Rex Bessey used that greeting. He climbed up from the staircase on which Charlie ascended. His face was a full, dark moon. Then another moon, checked black and white, the vest covering his huge paunch, rose above the steps. He smiled as he limped toward Charlie.

"I got more than today's quota. Those rednecks go apeshit over pickups. How you doing, Charlie?"

"Wasted too much time on Riches Dott, a hopeless case."

"That asshole Junkers thought he was screwing us when he gave me the white area and you the black," Rex said. "But when I remind those Neanderthal rednecks I played tackle for the Bears until I wrecked my leg, they get friendly. That makes me one of the good old boys even if I am a fucking nigger. What helps, I give them a few beers to soften them up."

His attaché case clinked when he shook it.

"Why don't you carry some beer, too?"

"Principles," Charlie said.

Rex laughed loudly. "Sure! You practicing genocide, and you got principles?"

Charlie did not get angry. Once, when drunk, Rex had admitted that he fully agreed with the sterilization policy. He hated his job, but he wouldn't like any work unless it brought in big money.

"This Laura Dott you'd like to rescue," he had once said. "She might make it, but only because she's very smart and strong. What about her brothers and sisters? They were born not so smart or so strong. Why should they have to live in the bottom of the shitpool just because they aren't superhuman? If they were given the environment your average upper-level poor people have . . . well, why go on? We've been through this before. End of lecture. Have another drink?"

Now he said, "Let's hoist a few at Big Pete's."

"The quota."

"That's Junkers's, not the GOOSR's. Why should we sweat and grunt and crap golden turds so that black-assed bastard can get promotion faster? I knew him when he was extorting lunch money from the little kids in sixth grade. He tried that once with me, and I kicked him in the balls. He hates my guts for that, but he isn't going to fire me. He knows I'll tell how he got his job, which he isn't qualified for, and he'll be out on his ass. Forget his quota."

Charlie had heard all this before. He said, "O.K."

Shortly before five, their eyes tending toward the glassy, they walked into the office. Junkers was not there. Charlie faxed his reports and went home to his apartment on High Street. It was one of seven semi-sleazy units in a once-magnificent mansion built by a whiskey baron in 1910. He could look down from his bathroom window at his domain of work, that part of Hell that did not border on the Styx, but on the Illinois River.

The small, dead-aided, and close-pressing apartment rooms rang with his footsteps as if they were great high-ceilinged palace halls. After his wife left him, he had been able to endure the apartment only when he was asleep. Now nightmares swarmed over him like carrion flies.

While his CD player poured out Mahler's *The Song of the Earth*, he ate a TV dinner. Then, sitting on the sofa, staring at the blank set, he slowly drank a tall glassful of medium-priced bourbon. Before he drowsed away, he set the alarm. Its loud ring startled him from — thank God! — a

dreamless sleep. Beethoven's *Fifth* was just starting its loud knocking at the door of destiny.

After a shower he looked out the window. The darkness was thick enough that lights were beginning to be turned on. For him, there was only one glow in the Southside of the city: Laura's, a firefly (family Lampyridae) winking above a night-struck meadow.

Twenty minutes later, his hangover only slowly receding, he drove away in his beat-up and run-down car. (Maybe he should get sterilized and have a new car for the first time in his life.) Ten minutes later he was in the Newstreet HPA area. He would not have ventured there alone after dark, but the green-capped Special Police and steel-helmeted Emergency Reserve troops stationed on various street corners ensured a sort of safety. An FDA-unit van passed Charlie on the other side of the street. Black, mournful faces looked out from behind the barred windows.

The shiny new cars were bumper to bumper in the streets, parked on the sidewalks and jammed into open lots between houses.

Charlie's car turned into the alley back of Tchaka's Fast Food Emporium. A young black, his neon-tubed garments glowing, leaned against the wall by the side entrance. When he saw Charlie's car, he shut the door and stepped inside. He was "Slick" Ramsey, one of Ketcher's gang. He looked furtive, but that did not mean much down here.

Unable to find a parking space in the alley, Charlie drove slowly around the block. Before he was halfway, he realized — he jumped as if stung by a bee — that the kids on their work break always stood in the alley, talking and horsing around. But they had not been there.

He brought the car screeching around the corner and into the alley. His headlights spotlighted Ramsey's shiny, sweaty face sticking out from the doorway. Ramsey quickly shut the door. Charlie stopped the car by the door and was out of the car before it had quit rocking. He knew, he just knew, that Ketcher, inflamed with snark, his cool burned away when he found out that Laura would soon be out of his reach, was no longer waiting to get what he just had to have.

Ramsey and another youth caught Charlie by the arms as he burst into the dimly lit hallway. A third, John "Welcome Wagon" Penney, came toward him with a knife in his hand. Charlie screamed and kicked out. His foot slammed into Penney's hand, and the blade dropped. Twisting and turning, stomping on the feet of the two holding him, he broke loose and

was down the hall and through the doorway from which Penney had come. Still screaming, he plunged into a large, well-lit storeroom. The workers were huddled in a corner, four of the gang standing guard, holding knives. One worker was down on her knees, vomiting, but several of her fellows were grinning and cheering Ketcher.

At the opposite corner, Laura, naked, was on her back on the floor with Ketcher, fully dressed, on top of her. Charlie saw her face, bloodied, her mouth fallen open like a corpse's, her eyes wide and glazed. Her outspread arms were pinned to the ground by the heavy feet of two gang members.

Silent, all stared at Charlie except Ketcher and Laura. He was savagely biting her nose while pumping away.

Charlie got to Ketcher before the others unfroze. No longer yelling, the others silent, the only sounds the slap of his shoes and those of the pursuers from the hall, he charged. No one got in his way, and he slammed his hands against the pockets of Ketcher's jacket. The vials within the bags broke; the two chemicals mingled; the bags popped like firecrackers; the brief spurts of flame from them looked like flaming gas jets.

Ketcher screamed while struggling to tear off his jacket.

The two standing on Laura's arms jumped at Charlie and grabbed him. Still silent, Charlie slapped at their pockets. There was more popping, and they let loose of him and tried to get rid of the clothes before they burned to death.

The workers ran yelling out of the storeroom. Some of the gang followed them. Two ran at Charlie, their knives waving. By then Ketcher's jacket was on the floor, but he was rolling in agony on the concrete, and seemingly unaware as yet that Charlie was here. Charlie snatched up the smoking and flaming jacket and thrust it into the face of the nearest knife fighter.

He had become a fire in a wind, whirling, slapping jacket pockets, staggering back when a blade went through his left biceps, grabbing a wrist when his cheek was sliced, and twisting the wrist until it cracked. Only because he acted like a crazy man and was as elusive as a gnat did he escape death.

When he saw Ketcher — his ribs, his shoulders, the front of his thighs, and one side of his face bright red with burns, again on top of Laura, but now slamming her head repeatedly into the concrete floor, blood spreading out below her, her mouth slack and open, her eyes shattered glass — Charlie truly became crazy.

Ketcher's only thought now seemed to be to kill Laura. It was as if he blamed her for the burns.

The rest of his gang had run out of the storeroom. They knew that the cops and the troops would soon be here.

Coughing from the smoke, Charlie ran toward Ketcher and Laura. Suddenly Ketcher sat back. His breath cracked. His chest heaved. But he looked at his work with what seemed to be satisfaction. Where the blood on Laura's face did not conceal it, her deep brown skin was underlayered with gray.

Ketcher rose, and Charlie turned. Ketcher started, and his eyes widened.

"You, you done this?" he said. "The white gooser?"

He half-turned and looked down at Laura.

"The uppity bitch is dead. I had her; she ain't gonna get away."

Charlie stopped and picked up a knife.

Ketcher turned back toward him. "I killed the bitch. I'll kill you, too, Charlie Charlie."

Charlie screamed. According to what he was told, he was still screaming when the cops came. He did not remember.

If he was screaming until his throat was raw for days afterward, it was because he was giving vent to all the futility and despair and suffering and the sense of being imprisoned, straitjacketed, chained, which he felt for himself and which the cesspool dwellers he worked for felt far more keenly than he. And it was for Laura, whose drive and brains might have freed her, given her some freedom, anyway. No one raised here ever really got free of it.

He did not remember stabbing Ketcher many times. Vaguely, he did recall a blurred vision of Ketcher on his back, his arms and legs up in the air and kicking like a dying water beetle. Charlie was told that blood had covered him, Ketcher, and Laura like liquid shrouds. His informant, a black cop, had not been trying to impress him. Born here, she had seen worse when she was in diapers.

When discharged from the mental ward of the hospital five months later, Charlie had no job and did not look for one. In what seemed a short time, he was on welfare.

The irony was doubled when Rex Bessey came to ask him if he wished to sign up for sterilization.

"I'm really embarrassed," Rex said. "But it's my job."

Charlie smiled. "Don't I know. But I'm not going to sign. My wife — you know Blanche — called me yesterday. She just had a baby girl. We're going to get together again. It may not work out, but we're trying for the sake of the baby, for ours, too. I got hope now, Rex. I'm on welfare, but I won't be forever. My situation's different. I wasn't raised on public aid, handicapped by my environment from birth, and I don't have two strikes against me because I'm black. I can make it. I will make it."

Rex got a beer and sat down. He said, "You've been so sunk in hopeless apathy, your friends just gave up. You know I was the last to quit coming around. You just wouldn't stop your dismal talk about Laura. I did my best, but I couldn't cheer you up. I'm sorry, I just couldn't take you anymore."

Charlie waved his hand. "I don't blame you. But I'm better. I know I'll make it. My wife's phone call, well, soon as I hung up, something seemed to turn over. How can I describe it? I'll try. Listen, Insects thrive as a species mainly because they breed so wondrously. Kill all but two, and in less than a year, there are 10 billion. It's nature's way; God's, if you prefer. People aren't insects, but nature doesn't seem to care about the individual human or insect being killed, or even millions being wiped out. Laura Dott was one of the unlucky ones, and that's the way it is.

"But I'm human. I do what insects can't do. I care; I hurt; I mourn; I grieve. But I wasn't doing what most humans do. Healing, getting over the hurt as time did its work, accepting this world for what it is. Nor was I trying to do my little bit to make the world just a little better. I gave up even that after Laura died."

Charlie felt silent until Rex said, "And?"

"Blanche and I were discussing what to name the baby. Blanche's mother was named Laura, and she wanted to name the baby Laura. I was so struck with the coincidence, I couldn't talk for a minute."

Rex leaned forward in the chair, his huge hand squeezing the sides of the beer can together.

"You mean?"

"One Laura down, one Laura to go."



From the author of "The Chaff He Will Burn," (April 1990), a superior story about a remarkable event in the life of a young boy who feels distanced from his world, as if he were a starship crewman beamed down and left behind. . .

Jimmy Blackburn Flies a Kite

By Bradley Denton

THE SOUTH WIND sang through the catwalk. Jimmy lay on his belly with his head hanging over the edge, listening. He worked up a gob of spit and let it ooze from his lips like syrup. When it fell, he closed one eye and watched. It curved away from the tower's east leg and stayed airborne almost ten seconds. Then it burst on the Potwin road, just missing a motorcyclist coming into town from the north. Better luck next time, Jimmy thought.

He stood and walked around to the north side of the water tank, sliding his hand along the rail. In the field below, Jasmine sat apart from the others, playing a five-year-old's game in the dirt with her Doll-Baby. She showed no interest in the brown paper kite he had made. It was lying in the weeds beside her, its shop-rag tail coiled. That was fine with him. As long as Jasmine was all right, he could stay up here awhile longer. Mom has told him to watch her, but she she hadn't said to stay close.

The other three kids were flying their own kites, or trying to. Chrissie

Boyle and Kyle Thornton were struggling with a green batwing, but it never rose higher than eight feet before diving. Jimmy wasn't surprised. Chrissie and Kyle were only seven, and they didn't understand what was necessary for a kite to fly. Kyle kept trying to throw it, and Chrissie kept running with the wind.

Chrissie's brother Todd had his kite soaring high. With nothing to do now but hold the string, he was spending his time laughing at Chrissie and Kyle. Todd was almost twelve. He was more than a year older than Jimmy, and liked to think of himself as Boss Stud of any group. Being Boss Stud meant having the right to ridicule everyone else.

Jimmy didn't mind. Compared to Dad, Todd was an amateur. Besides, Jimmy preferred solitude over groups. It was only when Mom made him look after Jasmine that he had any use for other kids.

He looked up, squinting at the July sun, and watched Todd's kite for a minute. It was a shield-shaped piece of plastic decorated with the face of a roaring tiger. Below it a knotted black tail lashed. The tail looked as if it were brushing the top of Clay Hill a half mile away.

Jimmy headed west around the tank, reading for new graffiti beneath the letters that spelled WANTODA. Ever since he had realized that there was no useful truth in either religion or textbooks, he had relied on the water tower and other popular media to teach him what people thought was important. DRINK MORE WHISKEY, the tank said. '68 RULES. WORLD'S BIGGEST SPITTOON. A-BOMB THE COOKS. CHERYL SUCKS TO THE HILT. FORD-FOUND ON ROADWAYS DEAD. JOEY+HOLLY. SKOOL DONT TEECH DIK. '70 IS BEST YEA! LARRY+JULIE. KING GOT WHAT HE DESERVED. TOM-MY+SUSIE OOOH! SALLY WARDERS IS A CARPENTER'S DREAM (FLAT AS A BOARD). EAT SHIT. DAVID P.+SAM O. =QUEER BAIT. DORIS IS A PIRATE TREASURE (SUNKEN CHEST). KILROY WAS HERE & CHERYL SUCKED HIM. SO LONG BOBBY K. DOPE IS GOOD. KILL ALL COMMIES NOW! GARY+MELANIE. FUCK NIXON. '69 FOREVER! Last weekend, Jimmy had put a sandwich and some notebook paper into his army-surplus backpack, and he had come up here and copied everything down. He was sure that if he took it all to heart, he would know how to live in the world.

But he wouldn't add anything to the jumble. Placing his own words among these would be like placing himself among their authors. He had to live in the world, but he was also separate from it, as if he were a starship crewman beamed down and left behind. Or, as Mom had told Mrs. Boyle

last week at Nimper's IGA, as if he were a devil child swapped at the hospital for the real thing. Jimmy guessed that meant there was a kid his age stuck with a bunch of demons in Hell. Trade you, he thought.

He had almost decided there was no new graffiti, when, on the south side of the tank, he found something written along a seam. This was in Magic Marker instead of spray paint, and it was too small to be seen from below. It said:

jimmy blackburn is a pussy.

He rubbed the words with his thumb, and they smeared. A thunderstorm had come through yesterday evening, so the insult had been written since then. He began to have suspicions. Chrissie, Kyle, and Todd had all been goofing around beside the tower fence when he and Jasmine had come to the field. But neither Chrissie nor Kyle had the guts to climb the ladder.

Jasmine's voice rose to Jimmy in a shriek. He returned to the north side of the tank and looked down.

Todd had pulled in his kite, and now he was standing over Jasmine and thrusting the tiger face at her. He roared as the plastic touched her skin, and then he yelled, "I'm gonna eat your baby! I'm gonna eat your baby!" Jasmine held Doll-Baby close to her chest and bawled.

"Hey!" Jimmy yelled. "Big man!" The metal wall behind him rang. His words echoed from Clay Hill, and it was toward Clay Hill that Jasmine looked.

Todd held his kite in one hand and snatched Doll-Baby from Jasmine with the other. He rubbed Doll-Baby's head against the tiger's mouth. "It's eating your baby!" he cried. "It's eating your baaaabeeeee!"

Jasmine, screaming, lurched to her feet and reached for Doll-Baby. Todd danced away, mimicking her cries. Chrissie and Kyle continued to try to launch their batwing.

Jimmy walked to the hole in the catwalk over the south leg. He wouldn't hurry. If he hurried, he might make a mistake going down the ladder. Besides, no matter how quickly he got to the field, Todd would be sure to stop torturing Jasmine before he arrived. Then, if Jimmy tried anything, Todd could claim self-defense.

Todd thought he was smart.

But if Todd were smart, he wouldn't be messing with Jimmy Blackburn.

* * *

WHEN JIMMY walked into the field, Todd was back to flying his tiger. Jimmy only glanced at him on the way to Jasmine, who was sitting beside the paper kite again. She was kissing Doll-Baby.

"You O.K.?" Jimmy asked.

Jasmine looked up. Her face was wet. "He tried to eat Doll-Baby."

"No, he tried to bug you. You need to act like you don't care."

Jasmine glared. "He took *Doll-Baby*."

"You're getting too old for Doll-Baby anyway."

Jasmine stood and kicked Jimmy in the leg.

"Want to go home?" he asked.

"And never come back. I hate Todd Boyle."

"Waste of time." Jimmy looked down at the kite he had made. There was a hole where he had drawn the eagle, and the support sticks were broken.

"Todd Boyle stomped it," Jasmine said. "And he threw the string." She pointed at a white line that zigzagged off among the weeds.

"I can make another kite," Jimmy said. "I can make a hundred." He looked across at Todd, who was ignoring them. "Did he do anything else?"

"He said you wouldn't fight, and he called you a pissy."

"'Pussy.' Say it right or you'll get made fun of."

"Are you?" Jasmine asked.

Jimmy picked up his broken kite. "Am I what?"

"Are you going to fight Todd Boyle?"

"No." He started walking.

Jasmine toddled beside him, dragging Doll-Baby by one arm. "But he was mean to me."

"Lots of people are mean."

As they passed Chrissie and Kyle, Kyle said, "Jimmy, our kite won't go up." He sounded as if he were about to cry.

Jimmy stopped to help. As the batwing ascended, Chrissie said, "We have a new baby at our house." She spoke with defiant pride, as if the baby made up for not being able to fly a kite. "Her name is Tina, and she's only four weeks old.

"So?" Jasmine said.

"Be nice," Jimmy said, helping Kyle pay out the string.

"So my mom says Tina is the prettiest baby in the state," Chrissie said.

"Me and Jimmy saw her at the store," Jasmine said. "She looks like a mashed turtle."

Chrissie shoved Jasmine. "You take that back!"

Jasmine swung Doll-Baby at Chrissie's head.

"Chrissie, look!" Kyle shouted. The batwing was almost as high as Todd's tiger.

Jimmy pulled Jasmine away from Chrissie, and Chrissie begged Kyle to let her hold the string. Things blew over fast when you were little. When you got older, they didn't. Jimmy guessed that someday they wouldn't blow over at all.

After Jimmy and Jasmine crossed the Potwin road, Chrissie and Kyle cried out behind them. Jimmy looked back and saw that the tail of Todd's kite was smacking the batwing. Kyle was trying to pull the batwing away, but it only bobbed in place. Todd was going "Moo-hoo-HA-HA-HAAAA!" Chrissie and Kyle began yanking on their string together.

Jimmy knew what would happen. The batwing's string snapped, and the kite tumbled backward until it crashed on the road. A farm truck ran over it. Kyle began to cry, and Chrissie screamed at her brother.

"That's what happens," Todd shouted. "That's what happens when you get help from a pussy."

For the first time since Jimmy had come down from the tower, Todd looked at him. And grinned.

Jimmy turned to resume the two-mile walk home. Jasmine went into the ditch, her shoes squishing on the wet ground at the bottom, and ran ahead. She thunked Doll-Baby's head on fence posts as she went.

"Won't that hurt her?" Jimmy asked.

"She likes it," Jasmine said.

As they passed the shattered batwing, Jimmy threw his own kite into the road with it. He kept the tail.

When Dad got home that evening, he came into the kitchen and said, "Supper fixed?" to Mom. This was a sign of trouble. Jimmy tried to get out the back door.

"Where you think you're going?"

Too late. "Nowhere."

"Nowhere what?"

"Nowhere, sir."

"You get your chores done? You smash those cans like I told you?"

"Yes, sir. I put them in grocery sacks."

Dad looked as if he were trying to think of something wrong with that.

"He was good today," Mom said. "He took care of Jasmine this afternoon so I could get some things done."

Jasmine popped into the kitchen. "He was too pussy to fight Todd Boyle."

Jimmy heard his heartbeat in his head. He tried to open the door, but Dad gripped his arm before he could turn the knob.

"You say that word to your sister?" Dad shook Jimmy so hard that his shoulder popped.

Jimmy was mad. "I didn't do nothing."

Dad opened the door and dragged Jimmy across the yard into the garage. He propelled Jimmy face-first against the pickup fender and told him to drop his pants.

Jimmy let his jeans and briefs fall around his ankles. Then he gripped the rim of the wheel well, palms up. He would not cry.

He heard Dad take the piece of fiberglass fishing rod from its nails. It whished through the air twice. Jimmy shut his eyes and clamped his teeth. He would not cry.

The rod hissed a third time and bit into his buttocks. He sucked air through his teeth.

"You gonna teach your sister nasty words?" Dad asked.

"No," Jimmy said. *Eat shit.*

The rod hit the backs of his thighs. Jimmy yelped before he could stop himself. Dried mud inside the wheel well crumbled between his fingers.

"No what?" Dad asked.

"No, sir," Jimmy answered. He heard his saliva drip into the fender. *Queer bait.*

The rod hit his thighs again, with an even hotter sting. His nose began to run. Tears squeezed past his eyelids.

"You gonna back-talk me anymore?" Dad asked.

"No, sir." *Fuck Nixon.*

"Carl." It was Mom. Jimmy knew better than to look around. "Jasmine says that James didn't say that word to her. She says it was another boy, being mean."

"I ain't whipping him for talking dirty," Dad said. "I'm whipping him for talking back."

Mom's shoes crunched on the concrete as she left.

Jimmy cried.

When Dad was through, he put the rod back on its nails and said, "Turn around."

Jimmy did as he was told. His legs and bottom burned as if matches touched them in a hundred places.

Dad put his thumbs in his pockets. "Was some punk bothering your sister?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did you whip his ass?"

"No, sir."

Dad looked at him for a long time. "Guess I raised a sissy," he said then. "Didn't I?"

Jimmy had to answer. "Yes, sir."

Dad went to the door. "Pull up your pants," he said, and went out.

JIMMY LAY in bed reading a *Green Lantern* comic book. He had already read it ten or fifteen times, but he wanted to keep its events sharp. The new issue was on the rack at the IGA, and he would buy it on Saturday after Mom gave him his allowance.

He was sweating, and the sweat made his welts sting. His room had once been a pantry, so there was no window. In a few weeks, when it was hot enough, Mom would let him sleep on the couch in the living room.

After he finished the comic, the welts hurt worse. He wondered how Dad would like it if *he* were the one who was whipped every time he said something wrong. Jimmy looked at his own fishing rod in the corner. Maybe in a few years, he would see if he could give as good as he got.

He sat up and pulled the rod onto the bed. It was a six-foot length of thick black fiberglass. Its Zebco 404 reel was loaded with a hundred yards of twenty-pound test monofilament. At Christmas, Dad had said he'd chosen the sturdy pole and strong line so that Jimmy could catch some really big ones. So far, though, they had gone fishing only once. Dad had gotten disgusted with Jimmy for having trouble threading a worm onto a hook. "If you ain't going to fish right," Dad had said, "you might as well not fish at all." Then he had thrown their stuff into the pickup and driven

them home. Several times over the next week, Jimmy had dug up worms near the septic tank and practiced. But it had been for nothing.

The door opened. "That's it, James," Mom said. She pulled the string to turn off the light. "Time to go to sleep."

Jimmy put his fishing rod back in the corner. "Night, Mom."

She stood framed in the doorway. "You aren't bleeding, are you, honey?"

"No." The cut on his thigh was small. His jeans had been stuck to the cut, but it had bled only a little when he'd pulled the jeans down.

"All right," Mom said. "Just be sure to be respectful from now on, and you won't be spanked anymore."

"Yes, ma'am."

"That's a boy. Good night, dear."

"Night."

She closed the door, and Jimmy lay still, listening. As usual, Jasmine threw a fit at having to go to bed. Also as usual, Mom soothed her until she settled down. Then Mom and Dad had a fight. Jimmy scrambled the words in his head.

When the fight was over, Dad watched the end of the "Thursday Night Movie," and Mom took a bath. Jimmy tried to hear the movie through the noise of running water. There were sirens and gunfire. Usually these sounds put him right to sleep, but tonight his welts kept him awake.

He was still awake after Mom and Dad had gone to bed and Dad was snoring. Jimmy waited until he was sure that Mom must be asleep, too, and then he got up. He dressed without turning on the light. When his shoes were tied, he opened his door just enough and slipped into the kitchen. He closed it so that there was no click.

At the back door, he paused. Dad was still snoring, so Jimmy took the key from the nail over Mom's wringer washer. He couldn't unlock the deadbolt without making noise, but he didn't think Mom and Dad would hear. If Jasmine did, she might wake up crying for fear of monsters. But that wasn't unusual. If she kept it up long enough, Mom might come to tell her it was only a bad dream. Jasmine had lots of bad dreams, and Mom no longer looked in on Jimmy just because his sister was bawling.

Jimmy unlocked the bolt, opened the door, and stepped outside. He closed the door and relocked the bolt, then crept around the house into the front yard. When he reached the road, he jumped into the ditch and ran toward town.

He could see the water tower ahead. It was like a silhouette of the Tin Woodman, black against the purple sky.

Dogs in town barked at Jimmy, and a few lights came on. The dogs didn't scare him. He and the dogs got along. Some of their owners, though, might call Officer Johnston, the Wantoda cop. Johnston loved grabbing kids out after curfew. But only one car passed Jimmy before he reached the Boyles', and he was able to hide behind a parked van. The car wasn't Johnston.

The Boyles didn't have a dog. A white cat ran from Jimmy as he came up the driveway, but he wasn't startled. The house was dark, as were all the houses on this street. He went to the backyard gate, stopped to listen, and climbed over. The chain-link rattled as if in a breeze.

Jimmy crawled through the grass like a lizard. He kept close to the flower bed that Mrs. Boyle had lined with chunks of granite. He would be chigger-bit, but that was better than being seen. Some of the windows above him were open, so he was careful to be quiet. He slithered behind the house, hoping Todd's window wasn't open, too. He wanted to break glass. He had been invited over here once, before Todd had turned into Boss Stud, and he remembered that Todd's room had blue carpeting on the floor and a portable TV on the dresser. If the TV was still there, maybe he could hit it with the granite boulder he would heave inside.

A wail made him freeze. It came from the window directly above. Jimmy remained still until he heard voices from deeper within the house, and then he crawled over the rocks into the flower bed. He pressed against the house's foundation. A yellow rectangle shone onto the grass where he had been.

"Are you dirty, sweetheart?" Mrs. Boyle's groggy voice asked. The wail continued. "No? Hungry?" A moment later the wail stopped.

The foundation was cool and gritty against Jimmy's cheek. Petals tickled his nose.

Mrs. Boyle began singing. "Hush, little baby, don't you cry. Mama's gonna sing you a lullaby. . . ." She was accompanied by creaking wood.

Jimmy got to his knees. Then he stood. He could just see over the windowsill. Flower-print curtains hung on the other side of the screen. There was a gap between the curtains, and he could see Mrs. Boyle in a rocking chair beside a white bassinet. The top of her robe was open and pulled

to one side. Baby Tina Boyle was sucking on the exposed breast. When Baby Tina stopped sucking for a second, the nipple stood out bright red.

Jimmy was fascinated. When Jasmine had been a baby, he had never seen Mom feed her with anything but a bottle. And he had never seen a lady's breast, although he had seen pictures. The real thing was more amazing.

The door behind Mrs. Boyle opened. Jimmy almost ducked and ran, but then he saw Mr. Boyle's sleep-puffed face. He hadn't been spotted.

"She O.K.?" Mr. Boyle asked.

"She's fine," Mrs. Boyle said. "Go back to bed."

"Seems like she wants to eat twice as often as Todd and Chrissie did."

"About the same. You're just waking up more."

Mr. Boyle grunted. "Is she gonna starve while we're at Chrissie's what-chacallit on Saturday?"

"It's a tonette concert. That plastic instrument is a tonette, and don't you let Chrissie hear you refer to it as a whatchacallit. I want to buy her a flute when school starts." Mrs. Boyle shifted Baby Tina in her arms. "I'll get a sitter for Saturday."

"Why? We'll be gone, what, from 1:00 to 2:30? Todd can handle it."

"She's a month old, and he's just a little boy. Besides, he'd rather be out playing with his friends."

"He's gonna be twelve in September. He can watch a baby sleep for an hour and an half, or I'll know the reason why." Mr. Boyle yawned. "Well, have fun." He closed the door.

Baby Tina squeaked, and Mrs. Boyle began singing again.

Jimmy sank to the flower bed. He waited until the singing stopped and the yellow rectangle disappeared, and then he returned to the grass. He crawled back to the gate.

He didn't want to break Todd's window. That would only make Boss Stud mad.

What Jimmy wanted was to make Boss Stud dead.

Before going home, he went to the water tower. He squirmed through the hole in the fence, went to the south leg, and began climbing. He had never done this in the dark. The rungs were wet, and one of his feet slipped when he was halfway up. The sensation of almost falling was wonderful. He tried to re-create it after a few more rungs, but it didn't work. The slip had to be unexpected.

On the catwalk, he leaned against the rail and gazed over the town. He hadn't realized that a tiny burg like Wantoda had so many lights. They were spread out below him like a field of stars. It was as if he were an astronaut a billion miles from home, and the water tank were his spaceship. Down on Potwin road, Officer Johnston's patrol car cruised past without slowing. It was a sign to Jimmy that he could do anything.

He made it back home and into bed without being caught.

JIMMY LEFT his room as soon as Dad drove away. The garage would be his until six o'clock. He took his fishing rod and pocketknife with him when he left the house. He came back for crayons, Scotch tape, and Mom's stapler.

In the garage he tore a huge sheet from Dad's four-foot roll of brown paper. He was measuring it on the floor, when Mom came looking for him.

"What are you doing, James?"

He looked up. "Making a kite. The other one got busted."

"Don't you want breakfast first? We have Wheaties."

"Could I wait and come in at lunch?" He resumed his measurements.

"I suppose so. Does your father know you're using that paper?"

"Yes, ma'am." Dad had granted permission for him to use it for the first kite, and he had no reason to think he couldn't use it for a second.

"Well, don't use too much. We don't know what he wants it for."

Jimmy doubted that Dad wanted it for anything. He had probably found it at work and taken it for no reason, as he had done with other stuff. But Jimmy knew better than to say so.

"And be sure to put that tape measure back where you found it. You know how your father is about his tools."

"Yes, ma'am."

Mom went away. Awhile later Jasmine came in carrying Doll-Baby. "Whatcha doing?" she asked.

"What's it look like?"

Jasmine cocked her head. "Why's it so big?"

"To make up for the busted one."

Jasmine lost interest. "I wish I had a bicycle," she said.

"You're too little."

"If I had a bicycle, I could give Doll-Baby a ride."

"If you'll go away," Jimmy said, "I'll give Doll-Baby a ride for you."

"You don't have a bicycle, either," Jasmine said, and left. She took Doll-Baby with her.

At lunchtime, Jimmy went into the house and ate macaroni. He watched Jasmine try to feed Doll-Baby, and he helped Mom with the dishes. Then he took one of Dad's saws and set off for Stranger Creek.

After returning to the garage, he measured and whittled two of the willow saplings he had cut. When they were finished, he put the kite together. He attached the tail from the first kite, but added ten more shop rags from Dad's barrel. Then he used a length of monofilament to bend the crosspiece into a bow. Finally he tied the kite to his rod and reel line and took it outside.

It worked. It worked so well that it almost dragged him across the pasture. He let it fly at low altitude for a few minutes to be sure the paper wouldn't tear, and then he reeled it in and took it apart. He had the pieces stashed under his bed, and the garage cleaned up, fifteen minutes before Dad came home.

He made a special effort to be polite that evening. He didn't want to be sorer tomorrow than he already was.

Jimmy didn't care that it was daytime. If he was caught, Dad would whip him. Or maybe he would be sent to reform school. He could live with either one.

He sat on the curb down the block from the Boyles' and read the new *Green Lantern*. After a while Mr. and Mrs. Boyle and Chrissie came outside and drove away. Some older kids were riding their bikes toward Jimmy, so he stayed put until they were gone. Then, except for a man mowing his lawn two blocks away, the street was quiet. On a nice Saturday, the people of Wantoda liked to get out of town.

Jimmy stood, folded his comic lengthwise, and put it in a back pocket. Then he picked up his backpack and crossed the street. At the Boyles' front door, he reached into the backpack and took out the sack of cow chips he had collected that morning. He placed it on the stoop and lit it with a match. He donned his backpack. When the bag was burning well, he rang the doorbell and sprinted to vault over the gate into the backyard.

He was under Baby Tina's window with a piece of granite in his hands, when he heard Todd open the front door. As Todd yelled, Jimmy heaved the rock through the window screen, tearing it partway from its frame.

The rock hit the carpeted floor with a thunk, but Todd was still shouting.

Jimmy grabbed the sill and hauled himself inside. The door to the hallway was open, but he wouldn't stay long enough for that to matter. He threw the rock outside and went to the bassinet. Baby Tina's face was squinched up. She was wearing only a diaper, and Jimmy worried that the tough canvas of the backpack might chafe her skin. But speed was essential. He shrugged off the pack, placed its open mouth beside Baby Tina, and rolled her inside. He buckled the flap.

Todd's shouts stopped. Jimmy grabbed the backpack's shoulder straps, went to the window, and leaned out to lower the pack as far as he could. When he let go, Baby Tina had to fall only a few inches. She began to wail anyway. Jimmy heard the front door close.

"If you think I'm gonna come in there and change your pants, you're crazy!" Todd yelled.

Jimmy clambered through the window and dropped to the flower bed. He reached up and pulled the torn screen more or less back in place. Then he picked up the pack and ran to the gate.

Seconds later he was walking down the street, whistling as loud as he could. But that wasn't loud enough to drown out Baby Tina, so he shifted his weight from side to side to make the pack sway on his back. Baby Tina's cries subsided.

No one was on the street, and Jimmy saw no one watching from windows or doorways. Even the lawn-mower man had gone inside. Jimmy turned a corner and headed for the kite-flying field.

He found Jasmine where he had left her. She was sitting on a bare patch of ground beside the water-tower fence, spitting into the dirt and using her fingers to draw muddy squiggles.

Jimmy glanced at the wrapped bundle beside her. "Did you do a good job guarding my stuff?"

"Uh-huh." She looked up at him. "You help me find Doll-Baby now?"

Jimmy shook his head. "You have to do one more thing first." Baby Tina squirmed and began to cry again.

Jasmine tried to peer around Jimmy at his backpack. "Whatcha got?"

"A bloodhound puppy," Jimmy said. "It's howling because it wants to track Doll-Baby, but I won't let it out until you do what I say."

Jasmine scowled. "No fair."

Jimmy looked at the sky. "I guess you're too little anyway."

"Am not!"

Jimmy shifted his weight to quiet Baby Tina. It didn't work this time. "O.K.," he said to Jasmine. "I'll let you try. You know how to get to Chrissie's house?"

"I went there for birthday cake."

"Then you can go there again. But you have to promise to be careful crossing the streets." He paused. "Mom might not want you to go by yourself."

"Would, too!"

"All right. Go to Chrissie's house and put this on the doorstep." He took a folded piece of paper from a pocket and handed it to her. He knew its words by heart: *Todd Boyle look in Baby Tina's room and be at field south of Clay Hill by Potwin Road at 1:45 P.M. to take her home or else we will kill her and your dad will kill you. Bring this to prove identity, signed, Some Friends. P.S. We are from Emporia so if you don't show up or if you call fuzz we will take her to beef plant. Wantoda fuzz Johnston is drunk on Saturdays and won't answer anyway and if you call sheriff they will take three hours and she will be hamburger.*

Jasmine unfolded the paper and stared at it. Jimmy had written the note in cursive, and Jasmine couldn't read cursive yet.

"After you put it on the step," Jimmy said, "ring the doorbell and run away. This is a secret message, so you have to run before anyone sees you. If anyone does, say that you saw some men drop the paper. Can you do all that?"

"Uh-huh."

"Tell me what you're going to do."

"Go to Chrissie's. Put the paper on the porch and push the doorbell. Then run back here, and you help me find Doll-Baby with the puppy."

"Right. Get going, Agent X-9."

Jasmine refolded the paper and left. Jimmy didn't like sending her off alone, but it was the only way.

When Jasmine was out of sight, Jimmy took off his backpack and brought Baby Tina out for some fresh air. She squalled worse than ever. She was moist and red.

"It's O.K.," Jimmy said, jiggling her. "Hush, little baby, don't you cry. James is gonna sing you a lullaby. . . ."

After a few minutes, Baby Tina calmed down. Jimmy replaced her in the pack.

THE KITE was flying at the full length of its line when Jasmine returned. Kyle Thornton was with her, and he was immediately interested in the rod and reel. Jimmy had stuck the handle into the ground and braced it with clods. The shaft was propped on a forked stick, and it quivered with the wind. The monofilament, barely visible, curved upward in a blue arc. It was as tight as a banjo string.

"Neat!" Kyle exclaimed, reaching for the reel.

Jimmy pushed Kyle away, knocking him down. Kyle blinked, about to cry. Jimmy had never been mean to him before.

"Sorry," Jimmy said. He held out his hand. "You can't touch anything."

"I won't," Kyle said, pouting as Jimmy helped him up.

Jasmine shielded her eyes with her hands and gazed up at the kite. "Hey, what's that?" she asked. Her mouth opened wide.

A hoarse cry came from the road. Jimmy turned and saw Todd Boyle charge into the field. Todd's face was flushed, and his eyes were wild.

"You kids stand back a ways," Jimmy said. Staring at Todd, Jasmine and Kyle did as they were told.

Jimmy stood still until Todd was almost on him. Then he dropped and rolled forward. Todd fell over him, just missing the rod and reel. The rod shimmied, and the kite dipped. Its tail swung heavily.

"I'd be more careful," Jimmy said, standing. "You might make it crash."

Todd leaped up. "What did you do to her?"

"I didn't do nothing."

Todd held out the note. "Then what's this, you fucker?"

Jimmy snatched it away and tore it up. He let the wind take the pieces. "Nothing," he said.

Todd grabbed Jimmy's shirt. "Where's my baby sister?"

Jimmy pointed at the giant kite.

A pink form was suspended from it. The kite was so high, and the day so bright, that no features could be seen. But the drawing on the kite was clear. The baby was in the grip of an eagle.

Todd gaped.

"There were two men," Jimmy said. "I was across the road, and I saw them. I didn't know it was a baby they had until it was in the air, and

it wiggled and bawled. When they got it up where it is now, they left. I came over, but I've been scared to do anything."

Todd turned back to Jimmy and let go of his shirt. Then he punched him in the face.

Jimmy didn't flinch. The sudden pain in his nose shot into his eyes, but he forced them not to cry. He was used to sudden pain. He was getting better at not crying.

He pointed again. "Is that your baby sister?"

"I'm not stupid! A kite can't hold a baby!"

Jimmy looked up at the kite. "I dunno. It's awful big." He made his eyes widen. "Jeez, look! She just squirmed!"

Kyle began crying. "She did! I saw her!"

Jasmine stared up with an expression of horror.

Todd looked at Kyle and Jasmine, then at the kite. The change in his face made Jimmy want to yell like Tarzan.

"That ain't my sister!" Todd said. His voice trembled. "She weighs too much! She weighs eight pounds!"

"But, God, it's a big kite," Jimmy said.

Jasmine began to cry with Kyle.

"A baby weighs too much!" Todd said.

The wail of an infant came down from the sky.

Todd bumped against the rod and reel, and the baby flailed in the eagle's claws.

"She's still squirming!" Kyle cried.

The wail came again.

Todd yanked the rod and reel from the ground. As the kite started to pull him forward, he cranked the reel frantically.

Far up, the line snapped and floated toward earth in a squiggle. Kyle and Jasmine screamed. The kite shot northward, and the baby jerked.

Todd made a noise that was part moan, part whimper. He dropped the rod and ran across the field.

The wailing from above continued.

Kyle and Jasmine started to run, too, but Jimmy caught them each by an arm. "There's nothing you can do," he said.

Todd reached the Potwin road and ran north down the middle of the pavement. Jimmy watched him shrink.

The wailing became weaker, and weaker, and stopped.

The kite vanished behind Clay Hill.

Jasmine kicked Jimmy in the leg. "I hate you," she said. "You put Doll-Baby on your stupid kite."

"That was a *real* baby," Kyle sobbed.

"Doll-Baby's a real baby," Jasmine said indignantly.

Jimmy released their arms and picked up his fishing rod. He brushed dirt from the reel. "I'll find Doll-Baby for you now," he said.

"Liar."

He began to reel in the line. "I said I'll find her. You don't even have to help." He looked at Kyle. "And you don't have to feel bad. I'm sure that baby wasn't real."

"It was crying."

"It was fake. I saw the men put a tape recorder in its stomach."

"Oh," Kyle said.

The broken end of the line reached the tip of the rod, and Jimmy stopped cranking. "Mom was going to make oatmeal cookies," he said. "I bet if you guys went to our house, you could get some. I'll stay here to look for Doll-Baby."

"I'm not supposed to go home by myself," Jasmine said.

"Kyle'll go, too."

Kyle tugged Jasmine's arm. "Come on," he said. "Cookies."

Jasmine allowed herself to be dragged along, but she glared back at Jimmy. "I still hate you."

"Big deal," Jimmy said.

He watched to make sure they crossed the Potwin road safely, and then he looked north. Todd was climbing Clay Hill. As Jimmy watched, Todd fell twice.

Jimmy let the pain of his hurt nose get through and make him cry.

"Served you right," he said.

The south wind sang through the catwalk. The whole tower was vibrating with an intensity that Jimmy had never felt before. As he cut the fishing line that held the backpack against the boards, he said, "Worth the climb, wasn't it?"

He opened the flap. As the sun lit Baby Tina's face, she opened her toothless mouth wide. Her eyes shone. She liked this vibration, this

brilliance. She was smiling, maybe for the first time ever. And because no one was watching, and no one would know, Jimmy lifted her from the pack and hugged her. There was mealy yellow stuff on her legs.

Jimmy looked north and saw that Todd had vanished over the crest of Clay Hill. When Todd found the kite, he would be in a big hurry to get home, so he would probably leave the wreck where it was. Jimmy could retrieve Doll-Baby later.

The kite had crashed well beyond the hill, which meant there was no way that Todd could return home in less than thirty minutes. But Jimmy could be there in ten. If Mr. and Mrs. Boyle were back early, he would say that he'd found the baby in the field. And oh, by the way, he had seen Todd climbing Clay Hill.

If the Boyles were on schedule, all the better. Long before Todd showed up, his parents would have found their soiled infant alone in the house. Todd's troubles were just beginning. Jimmy took Baby Tina to the south side of the tank and showed her the place where the words "jimmy blackburn is a pussy" had been written. There wasn't even a smudge now.

Baby Tina gurgled, and he decided to do one more thing.

He put her into the backpack so that her head stuck out. He molded the canvas around her body and snugged it with the piece of monofilament that had held it to the catwalk. Then he took his rod and reel line, looped it through the shoulder straps, and tied it.

He released the brake on the Zebco's reverse. A firm grip on the crank would be important.

He kissed Baby Tina's ear and whispered, "You're an eagle."

Then he stood and swung her into the sky. He braced the rod on the rail and let Baby Tina fly toward earth as fast as he dared. For this one moment of her life, she would know how it felt to be free.





SCIENCE

I S A A C A S I M O V

OUT OF THE TYPEWRITER, ENDLESSLY WRITING

LAST WEEK I received a letter which contained the following paragraph:

"Recently, I attended a training session on using OCLC (a widely used cataloguing and inter-library loan database) as part of my studies for the Master's in Library Science. Needing a search key that would retrieve a multitude of records, I used your name. Unfortunately, if a given search key would retrieve over 1,500 records, the searcher gets the 'request impossible' message and instructions to narrow the search and try again. Your name is just such a search key. I refined my search by going in under "asim, foun" (for works by Asimov with the word "foundation" in the title) and was able to retrieve a manageable search result."

There you have it. No one has ever accused me of being a great writer, but the word for me is "prolific." No one ever doubts that.

Actually, there are two writers

of note who have written more than I have. The British mystery writer, John Creasey, has written something like 560 books, and the Belgian mystery writer, Georges Simenon has written over 500. Both are now dead.

I am, in all likelihood, the most prolific *American* writer who ever lived, with 451 books as of now (though a number of them are anthologies and other ancillary works), nearly 400 short stories and some thousands of non-fiction essays. (Many of the short pieces are included in my books, of course.)

If I live out a normal lifetime I might conceivably even beat out Creasey, though this is not the goal of my existence, so that if I fall short, I won't care.

What I am proud of is not the mere quantity of my writing, but its range. Creasey and Simenon wrote mostly, or entirely, mysteries, but I have also written science fiction (as you all know), and most

of my work is non-fiction. I have written on every branch of science at all levels from grade school to graduate school. I have also written books with titles such as *Lecherous Limericks*, *Asimov's Guide to the Bible*, *Asimov's Guide to Shakespeare*, *Isaac Asimov's Treasury of Humor*, *The Shaping of France*, *Asimov's Annotated Gilbert & Sullivan*, and so on.

In October 1989, I published two books. One was my most recent science-fiction novel, *Nemesis*, published by Doubleday, and the other a 400,000-word book entitled *Asimov's Chronology of Science and Discovery*, published by Harper's.

None of this was planned; it just happened. However, it has left me the world's best qualified expert on prolific writing, and I would like to devote this essay to that subject.

It means that I will be writing a personal essay, rather than on some learned subject, but the Noble Editor is very tolerant and allows me complete freedom of expression in this essay-series. Then, too, my last personal essay was *THE WORD I INVENTED*, in the October 1980 issue, exactly ten years ago, and one a decade doesn't seem excessive to me.

Will the readers be interested? I hope so. It is possible that a few among them have ambitions to be a

writer, and they might wonder if, while they're at it, they might not be a prolific writer with a wide range. There are advantages to it, you see.

For one thing, you get more money for a large quantity of writing than for a small quantity of equal quality, and we all want to make a living of sorts in this uncertain world.

For another, if you build a reputation as a rapid and facile writer of good quality and wide range, you've got it made. Editors are forever being caught short and finding themselves in need of an article or story on some subject and, if the question, "But whom can we get to write it?" is raised, someone is bound to say (no matter what the subject matter), "How about Asimov?"

The result is that I have never written a query letter in my entire life. The query letters go the other way. Editors propose articles to me and I either write them or don't write them depending on my schedule and on the state of my expertise. (I don't *quite* know everything, and some subjects I can't write on.)

However, before you get all excited about the prospect, I must tell you that there are also serious disadvantages to being a prolific writer, as you will find out if you continue to read this essay.

Actually, I expect that very few

of my readers will have the dream of being prolific, but there may be many who are simply curious about the whole process — or possibly appalled by it. How does someone go about being prolific? What kind of personality is required? What kind of talents? What kind of life-style results?

I did not start off being prolific, as, for instance, Robert Silverberg did. I was going to school when I started, and I was also working in my father's candy store, and both items took precedence over my writing. The result is that in my first eleven years as a writer (during which time I obtained all my degrees, and managed to free myself of the candy store) I published only 60 science fiction stories, and not even a single book.

It was, in fact, not till my twelfth year as a published writer that my first book, *Pebble in the Sky*, appeared under the Doubleday imprint. It was published on January 19, 1950, when I had just passed my thirtieth birthday — an intolerably late start.

In retrospect, that first book was a milestone for Doubleday for, since then, they have published 112 of my books, making me the most published writer in their history. What's more, I have three more Doubleday books in press while others are under preparation. It is

not surprising, then, that on January 16, 1990, they threw a big bash at Tavern on the Green to celebrate the fortieth anniversary of the publication of *Pebble*.

Unfortunately, I was in the hospital at the time, but I didn't see how I could disappoint hundreds of people. I sneaked out of the hospital, therefore, with my dear wife, Janet, pushing the wheel chair and my faithful internist, Dr. Paul Esserman, in attendance and came to the party, and even gave a funny talk (sitting down).*

Afterward, I sneaked back into the hospital in the fond hope that no one had noticed I was gone, but the *New York Times* printed a small story about it the next day, and everyone saw it. I was severely lectured by the nurses. Lester del Rey called me up to yell at me for risking my life. My pleas that I couldn't disappoint people fell on deaf ears.

Things continued at half-speed for another eight years after I published *Pebble* because I had a full-time professorial position at Boston University School of Medicine and that had to take precedence. How-

* Incidentally, don't worry about me unduly. I got out of the hospital eventually, and while I'm not "as good as new" and never will be, I'm as good as a 70-year-old has the right to expect.

ever, new people came in as the heads of the department of biochemistry and of the school, and they were utterly unsympathetic to my spending my spare time writing rather than doing research. So they kicked me out of my job in 1958, by which time I had only managed to publish 25 books.

(I fought like the devil, though. I wasn't interested in the salary or the professorial duties, but I insisted on keeping the professorial title and I won out. To this day, I am Professor of Biochemistry at Boston University School of Medicine. So far, they haven't inflicted on me the indignity of an "emeritus" status that would indicate I was overaged and retired, probably because they haven't thought of it. Good! I don't intend to remind them.)

On July 1, 1958, therefore, at the age of 38, I found myself out of a job and without an assured income. To be sure, that assured income had been microscopic — \$6500 a year — and I made considerably more money out of my writing, but I felt nervous about the psychological aspects. Could I actually write full-time or would I quickly wear myself out and run my mind dry? Without the backing of an assured income would life become too insecure to be tolerated?

Feverishly, I threw myself into

my writing chores in order to get what I could out of my mind while it lasted, and it turned out I had no reason to worry. In the 32 years since I turned to writing full-time, I have averaged 13 books a year (I'm my own book-of-the-month club).

So how is this done?

In the first place, you have to love to write.

By that, I don't mean that you love to think up plots, or to imagine you have written a best-selling book, or even occasionally to sit down and doodle a few paragraphs.

I also don't mean that you love to look at a finished book with your name on it and to wave it around for people to see.

I mean that you love what comes in between thinking about a book and displaying a finished book. You must love the actual operation of writing. You must love scratching your pen across a blank piece of paper, or pounding the typewriter keys, or watching words appear on the word-processor screen. It doesn't matter what technique you use, you have to love the process.

I imagine that the wood-working hobbyist loves to feel the wood shape under his fingers; that the devoted jogger loves the feeling of his legs consuming the miles; that the devoted swain loves the touch of the skin of his loved one.

Well, that's the way a writer has to love the process of writing if he wishes to be prolific.

Mind you, the ability to write does not necessarily equate into the love of the process. There are good writers — even, I imagine, great writers — who don't particularly like writing and who constantly find excuses not to write. There are facile writers who have no trouble writing once they start, but have trouble starting.

Thus, Sprague de Camp has stated that if you wish to write you must plan for four hours of uninterrupted solitude, because it takes a long time to get started, and if you are interrupted, you would have to start all over again from the beginning.

In fact, you can even be a *compulsive* writer and not love the process. We all have compulsions we don't particularly like. Some are external, and force us, for instance, to wake up in the morning when the alarm clock rings because otherwise we might lose our jobs. We respond by cursing the alarm clock and yelling at the children.

Some compulsions are internal, as in the case of people who have to wash their hands forty times a day, or (as in my case) are forced to go back to a just-locked door to make sure it is locked, or check to see if a typewriter has been turned off im-

mediately after it has been turned off. When such inner compulsions get so bad as to interfere with life, you are likely to go to a psychiatrist to see if you can get rid of them.

A compulsion to write may be just as unpleasant to the writer as any other compulsion, and perhaps all the worse because he can't get rid of it without endangering his livelihood. No wonder so many writers become most ingenious in thinking up reasons not to write.

So general is the notion (and, probably, the reality) that writers hate to write, that there is a marked feeling among the public that writers must find some way of painfully psyching themselves into it.

I was once asked by someone what I did in order to start writing.

I said, blankly, "What do you mean?"

"Well, do you do setting-up exercises first, or sharpen all your pencils, or do a cross-word puzzle — you know, something to get yourself into the mood."

"Oh," I said, enlightened. "I see what you mean. The truth is that before I begin writing, it is always necessary for me to turn on my electric typewriter, and make sure my chair is arranged so I can reach the keys."

If I don't need any more psyching than that, then, in theory, I can type at any time, and, in practice, I

can. I don't need Sprague's four hours of uninterrupted time. If I have fifteen minutes, I can sit down and type for fifteen minutes. That's an absolute necessity if you wish to be a *prolific* writer.

On the whole, then, I think I can make the matter of loving to write even stronger. A prolific writer has to have a *passion* for the process. He has to want to write more than anything else in the world.

Sprague also once said: Suppose you sit down at the typewriter and look out the window and notice that it is a perfect day, with the sky blue, the grass green, the birds singing, a gentle breeze wafting — just the day to go out and lie in the sun, or play golf — and you say to yourself, "Well, I'll write tomorrow" and go out. In that case, he said, "You're not a writer and had better choose some other way of making a living."

Sprague may be a little too hard there. You may still be a writer, but certainly not a *prolific* writer.

I doubt that a pleasant outdoor scene could seduce me, but I keep the blinds down in my work-room at all times just in case. My favorite kind of day (provided I don't have an unbreakable appointment that is going to force me out into it) is a cold, dreary, gusty, sleety day. In that case, you see, no one I know (like Janet, as a wild guess) is going

to come to me and say, "Let's take a walk in the park. It's such a beautiful day."

In fact, I can go farther. I won't say this has ever happened to me but I can easily imagine it. If you have a date with a girl and intend to spend a pleasant evening with her doing whatever it is that would make it pleasant, and if you are typing hotly and suddenly notice that you just have time to wash, get dressed, and leave for the date, you will mutter an expletive and wish you had made the date for the next day, or the next year. The fact is you would rather type, and that is what makes you a prolific writer.

If you try to be prolific without being passionate about the process of writing, you will break under the strain, for writing is notorious for breaking its practitioners. Writing without passion is like driving with the brakes on, like pulling an un-wheeled cart over a rough road. You can't go on long without being forced to stop.

Why is this? As has often been pointed out, writing is a very lonely occupation. You can talk about what you write, and discuss it with friends, editors, or family, but when you sit down at the typewriter you are alone with it and no kibitzers can help you. You must extract every word from your own suffering mind.

It's no wonder writers so often turn misanthropic or are driven to drink (or worse) to dull the agony. I've heard it said that alcoholism is an occupational disease with writers.

Obviously a prolific writer can't afford any of these diversions, for with such indulgence he won't stay prolific. I, despite my day-and-night writing over a period of decades, don't drink at all, or smoke, or use drugs. What's more, I am known far and wide for my sunny disposition. Why is that?

Let me explain.

The writer's life is an insecure one. Each project is a new start and may be a failure. You may have sold a previous story or article, but that doesn't carry over. No editor is going to say, "This new story is no good, but the previous one was so good that the average still remains high, so let's publish this no-good new story."

Not at all. Whatever your batting average, the new story must stand on its own.

Knowing this, the writer is assailed by doubts whenever he writes. Is what he has written any good? Is that sentence phrased properly? Is he saying what he means to say, or is he being dull and obscure? The writer is always knitting his brow and puzzling over what he has

written. He keeps making changes, which is very time-consuming and usually doesn't lessen his insecurity one bit. And this can easily drive him to drink.

Undoubtedly, repeated revising and sweating and altering and lip-chewing can polish up a story and convert a so-so something into a great work of literature. I don't argue that point.

What I do say, however, is that though you can sweat out each line and be a great writer, you can't sweat out each line and be a *prolific* writer.

A prolific writer, therefore, has to have self-assurance. He can't sit about doubting the quality of his writing. Rather, he has to *love* his own writing.

I do. I can pick up any one of my books, start reading it anywhere and immediately be lost in it and keep on reading until I am shaken out of the spell by some external event. My dear wife, Janet, finds this amusing, but I think it's natural. If I didn't enjoy my writing so much, how on Earth could I stand all the writing I do?

The result is that I rarely, if ever, worry about the sentences that reel out of my mind. If I have written them, I assume the chances are about 20 to 1 that they are perfectly all right.

I am not completely certain, of

course. Some writers, according to what I have heard, such as Robert Heinlein and the mystery writer Rex Stout, never change a word they have written and hand in first draft. I'm not quite *that* good. I do edit the first draft and make changes that usually amount to not more than 5 percent of the total verbiage, and *then* send it off.

One reason for my self-assurance, perhaps, is that I see a story or an article or a book as a *pattern* and not just a succession of words. I know exactly how to fit each item in the piece into the pattern, so that it is never necessary to work from an outline. It all comes out naturally. Even the most complicated plot, or the most complicated exposition, comes out properly with everything in the right order, and requires little in the way of re-writing.

I can't explain how I do this; it comes with the territory. A Grand Master at chess probably sees a chess game as a pattern, rather than as a succession of moves. A good baseball manager probably sees the game as a pattern rather than a succession of plays.

And I see patterns, too, in my specialty, but I don't know how I do it. I simply have the knack and had it even as a kid.

Of course, it also helps if you don't try to be too literary in your

writing. If you try to turn out a prose poem, even a very good prose poet (like Ray Bradbury or Theodore Sturgeon) can miss sometimes. Even a slight miss in poetry can be terrible.

I have therefore deliberately cultivated a very plain style, even a colloquial one, and it is very difficult to do anything to spoil that. Of course, some critics, with crania that are more bone than mind, interpret this as my having "no style." If anyone, however, thinks that it is easy to write with absolute clarity and no frills, I recommend that he try it.

Another source of insecurity arises after a piece of writing (a novel, let us say) is completed and accepted and published. What will the critics say? How well will it sell? If it does not do well, you may not realize enough in the way of royalties to compensate you for the time you spent working on it. What's more, publishers may then be reluctant to take your next book, or may offer a smaller advance.

The mere fact of being prolific, however, removes much of that insecurity. By the time a book is published, the prolific writer has sold several others and is working on still others. He has no time to worry about the book that has just been published; he may not even remember it very well. He has more

immediate concerns in the typewriter.

Then, too, once enough books are published, a kind of "ever-normal granary" is established. Even if one book doesn't do well, all the books as a whole are bringing in money, and one fall-short isn't noticeable. Even the publisher can take that attitude.

Not one of my very numerous Doubleday books has caused them, as far as I know, an actual loss, but even if one did, it could be tolerated by them in the light of the general success of my books taken altogether.

With all the possible sources of insecurity, it is not surprising that writers often go into "writer's block." This is a painful disease in which they stare at a blank sheet of paper without being able to make marks on it. It is progressive, too, for the longer the inability to write continues, the more certain it is that it will continue to continue.

I imagine that if all a writer works on is a single task, it must wear him down and stop him eventually. Even I, when working too long and steadily on a particular project, am forced to stop when I cannot force another paragraph out of myself. In my case, though, this is not serious. I have a dozen other tasks to do and I just turn to some of them. By the time I am done, my

mind has had a chance to relax and work out my problems. I can then return to the original project and resume the easy flow.

But what kind of family life does a prolific writer lead?

A prolific writer has to be self-absorbed. He *has* to be. He should be at his typewriter at least eight hours every day, including week-ends and holidays. (In my younger days I used to manage, occasionally, to handle a fourteen-hour day, but age takes its toll. I can now only rarely manage even twelve hours.)

Even when a prolific writer is not at his typewriter, he's distracted. His mind (at any rate, my mind) keeps clicking away. I can hear scraps of dialog, bits of exposition, rolling past my mind whenever I am away from the typewriter. Even when I am not consciously aware of it, I know it's taking place.

That's why I don't need four hours of uninterrupted solitude to get writing. Everything is, in a sense, already written. I can just sit down and type it all out, at up to 100 words a minute, at my mind's dictation.

Further, I can be interrupted and it doesn't affect me. After the interruption, I simply return to the business at hand and continue typing under mental dictation.

Of course, all this means that

you are not really a family man. Janet is tolerance personified and is very fond of me and of all my quirks and peculiarities, but even she is sometimes goaded into remarking that we don't talk to each other sufficiently.

My beautiful, blonde-haired, blue-eyed daughter, Robyn, is very close to me. We love each other dearly, and recently I asked her, "Robyn, what kind of father have I been?"

I wanted her to tell me I was a loving father, a generous father, a warm and protective father (all of which I like to think I was, and am), but she thought about it and finally said, "Well, you were a busy father."

I imagine it does weary a family to have a husband and father who never wants to travel, who never wants to go on an outing or even to the theater or movies, who never wants to do anything but sit in his room and write. I dare say that part of the failure of my first marriage was the result of this.

But there's nothing I can do about it.

All this may totally disillusion you with being a prolific writer. You may well decide that the price you must pay is far too high, that it means allowing life, with all its glories, to pass you by.

My first wife once said, bitterly, as I was closing in on my hundredth book. "What good is all this, Isaac?

When you are dying you will realize all you missed in life, all the good things you could have afforded with the money you make and that you ignored in your mad pursuit of more and more books. What will a hundred books do for you?"

And I said, "Dear, when I am dying, lean close over me to get my dying words. They are going to be, 'Heck, only a hundred!'"

Well, my 451st book will reach me today, and if I should now find myself dying, I would murmur, "Heck, only four hundred fifty-one!"*

That leaves only one thing to discuss.

Suppose you have a passion to write and you turn out story after story, article after article, book after book. How can you manage to work so quickly and revise so little and still turn out books that a publisher would want to publish and a reader would want to read?

Ah, there you have me!

There's something called inborn talent, and what that might be, and how that might work, I haven't the faintest idea.

I apparently have it, and because of that I am, and have always been, a successfully prolific writer, and because of that, the happiest man in the world.

* *Actually, they would be my next-to-last words. I would want my very last words to be, "I love you, Janet."*

Hilbert Schenck wrote "Send Me A Kiss By Wire" (April 1985), "Steam Bird" (April 1984), among many others. His new story inserts a science fiction element into a tale of greed and development on a Maine island, and the results are surprising and entertaining.

A Down East Storm

By Hilbert Schenck

THE OLD LOBSTERMAN stared across the table at the developer's people, his eyes smoldering. He imagined pulling a deer gun out from under his chair and cutting loose at them all, their sly smiles turning to grimaces of terror, the blood erupting on their L. L. Bean plaid shirts, the shaking hands pushed out to stop the ripping lead slugs. "Go to hell, you bastids!" he gritted.

"Now, Caleb," said Harry Smithy, chief selectman of the small Maine hamlet of Hopedale, his bright, piggy eyes peering at Caleb Johnson's red and wrinkled face, "these fellers are here to help solve yore problems, you know."

The old man gave a bitter laugh. "To cheat me, you mean. My island is assessed for a million-two, and now you all say I can't get half that!"

Smithy picked a bit of lint off his checked sport coat, and his small eyes narrowed further. "The land court found for the assessors, Caleb. If'n you don't want to take Adventures Unlimited's offer, why, you

can just wait around for a better one. . . ."

"So you sonsofbitches can condemn it and get it for taxes!" shouted Caleb Johnson, his voice now a roar of anger. He struggled to his feet.

"Caleb . . . Caleb . . .," said his lawyer, Frank Mandell, reaching up with a calming hand. The young man in his conservative gray suit had appeared from Bangor, seemingly out of nowhere, a week ago. "Let me see what we can do here. Caleb." The lawyer was slight, his face thin, and he seemed almost indifferent to the overheated atmosphere of the county land office, but his quiet voice restrained the lobsterman who settled back in his chair, grinding his teeth.

Mandell smiled, superficially friendly, at the plaid-shirted developers, and he inclined his head to each of the four men in turn. His gaze lingered longest on Bobby Smithy, the selectman's son, and the young man selected by the vast development enterprise known as Adventures Unlimited to oversee the coming rape of Pistaquacchi County and its county seat of Hopedale.

These were real slime, he thought behind the smile, but maybe less than smart . . . half-smart was more like it. He shuffled some papers in front of him and pulled a letter from the pile. "It's true that under the new assessment, the tax on my client's ninety-acre Cranberry Island is far more than he can manage. And it is also true that the land court found the assessment to be fair and reasonable. In view of this, Mr. Johnson has contacted the Pistaquacchi Lands Trust, a nonprofit organization incorporated in the state of Maine. In this letter" — and he held it up for them to see — "they agree to accept most of Cranberry Island as a bird sanctuary and recreational area, leaving some six acres contiguous to my client's house and barns, as his property." And the lawyer now held up a small map of the island with most of it shaded.

Selectman Smithy grabbed across the table to seize the map, and then stared down at it, his suddenly agitated expression turning sly again. "Heh, it looks to me, Caleb, like you kept the best of it. It also looks to me like they's quite a bit of shore frontage, mebbe three . . . four hundred feet." His pig eyes were frosty. "At an assessment of two thousand a foot, it appears to me that yore tax won't be all that much less than it is now." The developers sat immobile, their expressions calm and unreadable.

The young Bangor lawyer shrugged. "Fraid not, Mr. Smithy," he said with just a note of challenge in his voice. "Under present Maine law,

any property less than eight acres cannot be taxed at an annual rate of more than 10 percent of the resident's total income. My client's income from Social Security and his lobster earnings" — Mandell paused as he extracted a 1040 form from the pile in front of him — "is ninety-seven hundred a year, so" — he smiled thinly around at them all — "Hopedale's tax bill to Mr. Johnson cannot exceed nine hundred and seventy dollars, somewhat less than he now pays."

The land lawyer from Adventures Unlimited, an aging, hard-faced New Yorker, gave a snort of disgust. "Who are you representing, Sonny?" he said in a sarcastic, cultured voice. "You're ready to piss away half a million dollars for your client. That money will earn a hell of a lot more than nine hundred and seventy dollars a year."

"True, Mr. Moulthrop," said Mandell, "but Mr. Johnson has lived on Cranberry all his life, with his father and grandfather before him. He values his land and his privacy."

"Some privacy!" snarled the selectman. "Picnickers droppin' their garbage everywhere and shittin' in the woods."

But now the young lawyer's face had turned to stone, and his voice tone had lost any lightness. "The land is assessed for one million, two hundred thousand dollars. Perhaps, in spite of the land court's decision, that is a bit high. In any case, our price is one million dollars, no more, no less. Furthermore, Mr. Johnson is to keep two acres around his house and continue to live there. That is one alternative."

He stopped speaking and reached to retrieve the map from in front of the selectman. "The other alternative is this one," he said, holding up the map again. "I might remind the selectman that the Lands Trust pays no taxes whatever." Mandell delivered this last thrust directly at Harry Smithy, and he no longer concealed the anger in his voice.

The room fell very silent as the two sides stared stonily at each other. Old Johnson was now peering intently at young Bobby Smithy, his weathered face expressing total contempt. The young man squirmed in his chair. "Caleb," he said in a plaintive voice, "this is a poor town in a poor county. We got to get more taxes. The rusticators, the summer folks, are the only ones to get them from."

Johnson's wrinkled lips twisted in a snarl of anger. "And to think I usta take you fishin', you little skunk! The reason the town needs all this damn money is so yore brother in the plumbing-supply business can sell

showers to the grade school so the second graders can waste even more time than they do now. And so the school board can hire yore sister-in-law as a . . . what the hell do they call it . . . *special needs* teacher. They's money in poverty, all right, but it ain't the poor that get it. It's the Smithy family and friends that'll wind up with the loot!" The old man was now on his feet, and his angry voice shook. "And you all gotta pay the assessors their little cumshaw, don't you, Bobby? Once you start rippin' and cheatin' people, things get costly — they really do!"

Selectman Smithy's face had darkened, and now he, too, got to his feet, and he angrily waved a finger at the lobsterman. "You watch yore tongue, Caleb! People can git sued for that kind of wild talk!"

Mandell had also risen. He seized his client's arm and propelled him toward the door. "You have our offer," he said coldly over his shoulder. "In one week we'll cut the Lands Trust deal unless we hear from Adventures Unlimited first."

Four days later a certified check for one million dollars was delivered to the Bangor lawyer, and the next day a surveying team was hammering in Day-Glo-red stakes all over Cranberry Island.

The lots were mostly an acre or so, long and thin to maximize the number with water frontage. The island, unlike many in the area, had passed a rigorous perc test, and its deep well was the best in the entire county, easily able to handle the expected influx of expensive summer homes.

Late one evening, a week after the angry meeting in the county land office, lawyer Mandell, accompanied by a young man and woman in dark, nondescript clothes, paid a visit to Caleb Johnson. They came in an old lobster boat from a southerly direction, choosing to make a twenty-mile night crossing of Mogoffin Reach rather than starting from busy Hope-dale's large and sheltered harbor.

The old lobsterman welcomed them into his kerosene-lit house. The place smelled of sweat, woodsmoke, and bait. He had tried to pick things up a bit, but the three young people paid no attention to the rough and rustic surroundings.

They all had some whiskey and watery ice, frozen in an ancient propane-driven Servel, and the lawyer drew the blinds as the other young man began to talk, first taking from a box what appeared to be a small TV set.

"Mr. Johnson, Frank has explained what we're going to try here with your property. As he said to you, we've been looking for a situation that was as close as possible to an ideal setup to try our gadget, and we think Cranberry is that spot."

Johnson nodded and poured himself another whiskey. "Frank says you got a way to scare people off'n the island. Is that it?"

The two young people nodded. "That's sort of it, although 'scare' isn't exactly what happens. We, my wife and I, are electronic engineers. We ran into a radio effect, what we call the 'B-Field' . . . that's 'B' for 'brain.' We were actually looking for a way of broadcasting an antibark command to dogs, sort of a radio signal that would inhibit nighttime barking in nearby animals. Instead, we came across something much more powerful and much more interesting. . . ."

Johnson was nodding, slowly taking it in. "So they's no wires to this — is that it? You don't have to hook people up?"

"Correct," said the young man. "You may have heard that some people can actually pick up radio waves in their teeth fillings. You may also have heard that subsonic — that is, low-frequency — sound produces a feeling of apprehension, of uneasiness with many people, even though they don't actually know what is producing it," he said.

The old man shrugged and grinned. "I'll hafta take yore word for that," he said.

The young man smiled back. "O.K., what we found was that we could broadcast with this B-Field directly into a person's head. You didn't need fillings or anything else. And what we broadcast is a sense of unease, uncertainty, dismay. The kind of feeling that some people describe as someone walking over their future grave."

"And that TV does it? Is that the idea?"

The man nodded. "It's dummy TV. If anyone gets wind of this, they'll instantly pass a law and make it impossible for us to use it. Frank convinced us that Cranberry was a good location. He also convinced us that you were a solid and dependable person, someone we could trust."

The old man nodded thoughtfully. "I'll trust the Devil if he can get my island back," he said.

The young woman laughed at that. "Deciding exactly who is the Devil bedevils most of us. But Smithy and company would seem to qualify."

Johnson swirled the brown whiskey in his glass, then swept them all

with a narrow-eyed look. "You say you trust me all that much, but you ain't introduced yoreselves yet?"

The two strangers exchanged glances with the lawyer, who carefully set his glass down and spoke. "We're not quite sure how this is all going to work out, Caleb. If someone figures out what is happening, or even guesses anywhere near close, they'll know you and I are in the thing, but they won't know about my associates here. We've got to keep this as secure as we can; please understand that." Mandell's voice was sincere yet firm.

Caleb Johnson slowly nodded. "I ain't goin' to give you away. Not as long as we're screwin' them Smithys and their sort of folks." He gestured at the fake TV set. "Let's see it work," he suggested.

The engineers both got up and went over to the set. The woman hooked a car battery she had carried in earlier to two leads, while the man busied himself with a series of potentiometer knobs revealed when he opened the top of the TV. He turned to Caleb. "O.K, Mr. Johnson, to turn it on, you set that channel at thirteen. That's all. Any other setting is 'off.'" He reached down, and they heard a series of clicks. "Here goes," he said in a tight voice.

Exactly nothing happened — no hum, no glow, no physical feelings — but as he looked around the living room of his little house, Johnson suddenly saw how worthless, how shabby and dirty, how filled with old and unpleasant odors, it really was. He wondered why he had fought, fought hard for over a year, to keep this dreadful little place from the crooked tax people, the sly and greedy town officials, the powerful and merciless developers. His nose wrinkled, and his eyes narrowed. Why didn't he just take the money and head off to Florida? Junk the tired old lobster boat and the endlessly breaking traps and gear? He looked up and saw his lawyer standing next to him.

"Let's go outside for a minute, Caleb," Mandell said in a harsh, rasping voice. His grip on the old man's upper arm felt tight and unpleasant, but the lobsterman got reluctantly to his feet and shuffled after the lawyer through his front door.

Outside, a spring full moon shone down on the tall pines of Cranberry Island, but Caleb Johnson was mainly aware of the outhouse smell, the buzz of blackflies, and the grating of his lobster boat swinging sullenly against the rotting pilings of his small pier. The view, which at other times he savored, and for which he had fought and worked his whole life,

had become flat and boring, an endless, stupid vista of similar trees. Suddenly the young stranger came up behind him and gently placed the old man's brown cap with its long black beak on his head, and it was miraculously all changed again, beautiful as always, the moonshine making a great silver path across the water, the many lobster buoys bobbing peacefully, dark and reassuring shapes blackly defined in the wonderful ribbon of moonlight. The tall, shapely trees sighed and moved gracefully in the light wind, and the lobsterman blinked and caught his breath. "God-amighty!" he gasped.

Mandell slapped him on the back and grinned in the bright moonlight. "Quite an effect, eh, Caleb? We lined the inside of your lobstering cap with a metal-screen shield that's energized by a NiCad battery. We'll show you how to change it when it gets weak. Just be sure to wear that cap whenever the field is turned on and you're on the island."

Carefully, slowly, Caleb took off his cap, and instantly the scene was different: dull . . . stupid . . . uninteresting. He put the cap back on, went wordlessly back into the house, and turned the channel selector on the fake TV to another channel.

"You surely have found something here, all right!" said the lobsterman in a hushed voice. "My gawd!"

The young and nameless engineer then explained to the old man how the field shield fitted into his cap, and how he could tell when the car battery powering the field generator was running low. "Frank told us your gasoline-driven water pump will recharge batteries, so you can just switch the spare one onto the set and take this one to your pump house for recharge. You should get a month or so per charge-up. I would keep the field off when you're here or in your yard and there're no salesmen with clients visiting. But when you leave to go to town or out lobstering, turn it on so that they won't close a sale when you're away. Be sure to keep the hat on when the thing is energized and you're home or close by in your boat. We're not sure what the long-term effects might be, but we figure severe depression will be the least of them. Well, Mr. Johnson, what do you think?"

Caleb rubbed his thin white thatch and grinned at them. "I can't really believe it. In another five minutes, I was goin' to take my money and head for Florida." He shook his head in awe. "And I absolutely *hate* Florida. I went two years ago to see my sister, and it's just got to be the worst place in the world!"

The room fell silent for a moment while the lobsterman thoughtfully stroked his face, then looked about at the others. "How come yore doin' all this?" he asked suddenly. "What are you gettin' from it?"

Frank Mandell stared directly back at him. "Believe it or not, Caleb, there are some people in the world that give a damn about keeping this county and this state the way it was. The rich people coming to squat on Bobby Smithy's lots have already wrecked their own towns with malls and blacktop and too much raw sewerage. We kind of resent them coming into this wild place and doing the same stupid things."

The lobsterman nodded and said nothing more, but he wondered. He didn't know much about engineering or lawyering, but in this world, the world he lived in, people didn't often go to this much trouble for reasons of that sort.

TWO DAYS after the engineers left, a big barge with crane and pile driver was tugged into the wide crescent of Cranberry Cove, and a working crew began erecting a large and sturdy dock at the cove end opposite the old man's modest and crumbling pier. The lobsterman debated calling the lawyer for instructions, but then decided not to use the B-Field unless Adventures Unlimited arrived with customers. Caleb started his lobstering day a little early, three in the morning, so as to be back before eight when the work crews arrived to build the dock.

In a week, it was done, and it was evident that the developers had decided to wait on showing the lots until the construction mess was cleared and the barge removed. The lobsterman now slept later, turned on the field when he went out, and spent several of the next days in town getting supplies and jabbering with his cronies at the lobster wholesaler's dock. No land customers had shown up, but Caleb noticed that Cranberry Cove, once considered top lobstering ground with its ledges and eelgrass, was losing its pot buoys. Caleb replaced the other men's traps with his own, and found the lobstering as good as ever.

Wednesday was poker night in the back room of the Hopedale Lobster Company, and after an hour or so of intense hands of draw poker, the men relaxed, drank a little whiskey, and chatted.

"You ain't settin' pots around Cranberry no more?" said Caleb Johnson in a mild voice to his old friend Billy Simmons.

Simmons, seventy-five if a day, shrugged and puffed on a cigar. "Ain't had much luck thar lately, Caleb. Gear gets tangled, and I don't seem to pull nothin' but shorts and culls. I think pore old Cranberry Cove is plumb tuckered out."

"Yeh," muttered younger, muscular Sam Colemore, owner of the biggest and fastest of the Hopedale boats, and with his equally muscular wife working as sternman, the undisputed top lobsterman in the area. "I think the water is 'gettin' warm there. I'm doin' better further out. And those damn developers with their barge and mess ain't helping things a bit." Colemore's sharp tone showed his resentment that Caleb Johnson had succumbed to the troublesome temptations of the hated developers. "What I just don't understand, Caleb, is how in hell. . . ."

Not all the poker men were lobster fishermen, and middle-aged Brian Halliday, a handsome New York city gay man, come to run a Hopedale bed-and-breakfast and escape the hassle and the AIDS in the big city, cleared his throat. He had become the gentle peacemaker among these hardworking, often impatient men, and now his quiet and cultured voice broke into Sam Colemore's irritated complaints. "Come off it, Sam. There's not a man in this room that would turn down a million dollars, even if he had to toss in the wife and kids."

Billy Simmons puffed and chuckled. "Gorry sakes, forget the million. They can have my wife for two pot buoys and a box of decent seegars."

The other men laughed and slapped their knees at that, but Halliday turned his dark, lean face to Caleb Johnson, and his voice was quiet and filled with compassion. "What will you do now, Caleb?" he asked. "Is it time to put your boat on blocks, perhaps? You could invest that money and go anywhere you ever wanted."

The men all turned to look at the old lobsterman. Some of them — the old-timers, anyway — knew that Cranberry Island meant more to him, infinitely more, than the finest condo in the most lavish senior-citizen community in Arizona or Florida. But Caleb did not seem downhearted or sad. He shrugged. "I ain't decided yet. I still got my house. I calculate I'll wait a bit and see if any suckers will plunk down money for them tiny house lots."

Halliday shook his head. "Don't get your hopes up, Caleb," he said in a resigned tone. "They gave you a million, but even if the realty market hereabouts goes completely bust, they can still price those things to

move. I hear they staked out over fifty lots. They only need twenty thousand apiece to recoup what they gave to you, and the downstaters and Boston yuppies will pay far more than that. They've got some big banks behind them. This is a no-lose business nowadays."

"Mebbe," shrugged Caleb, "but I intend to keep lobsterin' until the bulldozers arrive."

The first land customers arrived that next morning. A sleek forty-foot powerboat with "Adventures Unlimited" logos on her bow was guided skillfully to the new dock by Bobby Smithy, and several middle-age couples walked up the slanting gangway from the big float. The lobsterman, a hundred yards away, was mending some pots, and he casually shifted his stool so as to be able to watch them. The day was quiet, and he heard Smithy's enthusiastic, "You're the first folks to see this place. You've got your choice of lots. Jest pick the view you like." And Smithy gestured expansively with one hand while he held up a large map of the island with the other.

But the four couples did not seem too anxious to push back under the tall pines. They huddled in a small, tight group on the huge rock supporting the shore end of the pier, and looked apprehensively about. Two of the women were shaking their heads. "What about electricity?" Caleb heard one say while the other swatted at blackflies with irritated gestures.

"Would we need a boat as big as yours?" a third woman asked in a tentative, discouraged voice.

Bobby Smithy was walking back under the trees, and he waved enthusiastically at his customers. They finally straggled after him, and the last thing Caleb heard was a trailing woman snarling at her husband, "I really *hate* this place! Why do we want to live on an *island*, anyway?"

Caleb's expression remained one of knot-tying concentration, but he gently lifted his hat to scratch his white thatch and to be sure the B-Field was still doing its thing. It was.

As the cool spring changed to hot summer, more and more prospective rusticators arrived, walked tentatively about Cranberry Island, then disappeared forever. The small storage building near the big pier contained, among other things, a neat pile of "sold" signs, ready to be affixed to the posts that held the lot numbers, but the pile remained untouched.

Caleb Johnson came and went, hauling his pots, taking his catch to town, spending an occasional evening with the poker crowd or a cribbage

opponent; and as the summer passed, the rumors grew apace. Adventures Unlimited had invested over four million dollars in properties in and around Pistaquacchi County and had sold only a handful of lots. The new grandstand and lavish scoreboard at the high school, to be financed by the expected increase in the tax base, were put off until next year. The showers, locker rooms, and big gym at the little grammar school were held in abeyance as selectmen recomputed costs and revenues.

Fall came, and the talk was now of Chapter 11; and tax defaults, and requests for reassessments on certain large holdings that could find no market anywhere. The *Portland Press-Herald* headlined the situation in a mid-September issue: "PISTACQUACCHI LAND DEVELOPMENT DEAD IN THE WATER."

For almost two weeks, with no customers arriving on Cranberry, Caleb Johnson had tried to reach his lawyer in Bangor, but the girl was always putting him off. "Mr. Mandell is in Boston on a case." "Mr. Mandell is away on a short vacation." "Mr. Mandell isn't feeling well and won't be in for a couple of days."

Then, the day after his third attempt to phone the lawyer, something happened that disturbed Caleb very much. He had gone out to haul at five in the morning, before the wind started up, and when he got back to his place around nine, he found his house had been ransacked. Boards had been pulled up from the floor over his cellar crawl space. His sheds had been broken into. Someone had gone up into his small attic and thrown things down through the access hole, obviously so they could get at boxes underneath.

The lobsterman had taken the shut-off B-Field generator out of his house the previous week, after his first attempt to get Mandell, and hidden it in an old and abandoned root cellar on the other side of the island, a place where he and his father had once stored cases of liquor during the exciting and lucrative days of Prohibition. Leaving his house, Johnson wandered idly along the shoreline, then strolled back into the woods. There were lobster boats scattered about the waters surrounding Cranberry, and Caleb now ducked down and went on hands and knees quite a ways through the underbrush until he reached the root cellar. It was undisturbed, and he kept crawling and ducking until he emerged on a small beach on the other side of the island. From there he walked slowly around the shore, peering out over the water and thinking hard.

That night was rainy and blowy, and the lobstermen broke up the poker game early to go check their skiffs and boats. Caleb followed Brian Halliday up the hill from the dock, waiting until the others had dispersed in their separate directions. "Could I set with you a bit, Brian?" he said to the younger man in a tentative voice, and Halliday cheerfully nodded.

The bed-and-breakfast was quiet, only one end-of-season couple tucked in for the night, and Halliday poured some whiskey for the two of them, then settled himself in the small living room of his comfortable apartment. "Shoot, Caleb," he said to the lobsterman sitting tensely on the edge of his chair.

"You was a lawyer? In New York? Awhile back?" Halliday nodded. "Waal, I aim to buy back Cranberry, but all this talk of Chapter 11 . . . that's bankruptcy, ain't it?"

Halliday nodded soberly. "It is. They say Adventures Unlimited is definitely belly-up."

The lobsterman took a deep breath. "And if'n it gets into court, how long do you think it might be afore I could buy my land back?"

The New Yorker looked directly at Caleb Johnson, and his voice was level. "That's impossible to say. It might never happen. The land could be auctioned, or held by the banks, or broken up and peddled to other developers. I don't think you could count on the bankruptcy court considering an offer on one property out of the whole group." Halliday thoughtfully sipped his drink, then spoke again. "That lawyer, Mandell, who represented you at the closing — they say he's heading a consortium to buy up the assets of the developers. There's certainly no moss growing on that fellow, I should think."

Johnson shook his head in disgust, then spoke angrily. "I figured that might be it. Look, Brian, mebbe you better know the whole thing. . . ."

Half an hour later, Brian Halliday took a deep breath and whistled softly. "Well," he said, "you should understand that there's no need for any new laws to outlaw *that* gadget. Mandell and his es can be arrested on half a dozen counts: fraud, conspiracy, grand theft, you name it. And if it works with realty transactions, why not in any commercial situation? The stock exchange, for example? Caleb, you want to buy the island. Could you give the whole million back? That way, when this all comes out, you can claim you only just found out and wanted to do the honest thing."

The lobsterman nodded at once. "Ayeh. It's earned enough so's the interest on what's left'll pay the new taxes. I can even take out a loan for a better lobster boat."

Halliday got to his feet and reached for a raincoat hanging at the door. "Let's go see Bobby Smithy. He's probably drunk, and he'll certainly be mean as hell. That pretty wife left him last week for a young doctor at the medical center. But the sooner you do this, the better!"

Bobby Smithy's house was out on Hopedale Point, the fashionable hill location of the few well-to-do summer people who had "discovered" Hopedale over the years. There were two communal tennis courts, and each large house had its own stone pier and neat wooden float. The two men stood in the wet darkness and knocked several times before the door suddenly opened, revealing a disheveled Smithy standing in a disorderly, rubble-strewn hallway. The young man's face was flushed and sporting a scrabbly beard, and his T-shirt was torn and filthy. The house stank of liquor.

Bobby Smithy first saw the old lobsterman and raised a fist. "Wadda you want, you old bastard? You've done enough to me with your stinking outhouse and that rotten shack you live in, scaring away buyers. Why in the hell we let you stay on that damn island, I don't know. . . ."

Halliday stepped from behind the old man and seized Smithy's shirt in a tight fist. "Hold it," he said quietly. "Mr. Johnson is here to offer to buy back Cranberry. He's offering you one million dollars, just what you paid for it."

Smithy shook his head and half-laughed, half-snarled. "Even that simpleminded old fart wouldn't be stupid enough to do that," he said contemptuously. "That property isn't worth three shits. . . ."

Halliday moved past the drunken man into the house. "If you don't want to talk about this offer, get that lawyer, Moulthrop, on the phone. Now, Bobby! That money could save you people from Chapter 11. Call him, you little fool!"

Smithy stepped back and took some deep breaths. His eyes dropped, and he bit his lip. "You mean that, Caleb?" he said in a very tired, very little voice. "You'd give us back the million?"

The lobsterman remembered a special moment, the time ten-year-old Bobby Smithy, his eyes shining, his grin enormous, had hooked and then landed six mackerel on a single line. Johnson smiled at the young man.

"I'll do that, Bobby. I was never much at holding grudges."

Twenty minutes and four phone calls later, the deal was set up for the next afternoon. They left Bobby sitting quietly in an armchair, staring at the floor, and drove in the old man's rattling pickup truck back to the bed-and-breakfast.

"See you in the morning, Brian. We can git a certified check at the bank." And he clattered off down the hill toward the town dock.

Brian Halliday stood in his yard, the rain pouring down on his bare head, and watched the lobsterman drive off. When he had practiced trial law in New York City, he had been careful never to let events move too fast for him. He was a methodical, thoughtful man who spoke slowly and carefully in court. When the New York gay scene had become too frenzied, the choices and risks too chancy, he had left it all to join the slower-paced, lower-key Hopedale community. Now his mind turned the astounding unimaginable potential of the B-Field over and over, probing and pulling at it. This had all come at him too quickly! He wasn't thinking it through fast enough! He looked out across the black, stormy harbor, out beyond Hopedale Point where the Muscongus rock piles and island groups lay south and east: isolated, remote . . . unprotected!

A small car, only its parking lights on, came slowly by and followed the old man's noisy truck down the hill. If they had searched Caleb's place this morning and found nothing, wouldn't they then keep an eye on him? Brian Halliday felt a thin, icy chill run up his back. "Jesus Christ!" he muttered into the wild, blustery night.

The lobsterman chugged out of the harbor into a steep and nasty chop, turned south at the entrance buoy, and set off for Cranberry Cove. The old boat rolled heavily, and unseen lobster buoys banged occasionally against the hull, but his propeller cage prevented any tangling. It was almost pitch-black, but finally he made out the low loom of Cranberry and turned into the wind, aiming at where he knew the old pier lay. He thought he had never, in his hard and lonely life, been happier. It would all be his again tomorrow, and he could pull up the hated stakes and burn them in his stove. He tied up his boat and almost ran, whistling tunelessly, into his house. One more shot of whiskey, and then bed. . . .

"Where's the field generator, Caleb?" They had been waiting for him in the dark house, and they had guns and flashlights. "Quick!" said Frank Mandell in a hard voice. "That thing is our property. Get it!"

The lobsterman thought then that trusting the Devil was, at best, a chancy thing. "Threw it off'n my boat two weeks ago," he said in a low voice.

The three men waited, their flashlights directly pointed into the old man's eyes. "Maybe you did," said Mandell, "and maybe you didn't, but it doesn't matter all that much. Get out that door. We're going back to your boat."

The old man understood what that meant, and he shivered. "I've told others about this, you know."

"Maybe," said Mandell in a cold voice, "but you're the only one who has actually seen it work. On the other properties, we just hid the things and let them run. When they find you set on the bottom tangled in a couple of your pots, we figure anyone you told will think you were dotty and suffered a regrettable accident. Get moving, old man."

Caleb Johnson imagined running, making them shoot, but the screaming wind would easily cover that racket. The old boards of his pier creaked under his feet, and his mind raced. Perhaps he could drive the boat ashore or into some rocks. Maybe he could just go over the side close to shore and get into shallow water where they couldn't go.

"Walk!" snarled the lawyer. "And don't try anything funny. We can shoot you here and tie you to a rock-filled trap in Muscongus Reach where they'll never find you. . . ."

"Stop right thar!" Lights came blindingly up, on both sides of the pier, and the whole thing vibrated wildly as two big lobster boats slammed into it and heavy-booted men jumped ashore. Sam Colemore, his gold deputy badge shining in the car headlights mounted on his cabin roof, swung his ten-inch-barrel magnum revolver, catching Mandell across the head. The lawyer fell like a stone. Right behind Sam clumped huge, sturdy Madge Colemore, hefting her Winchester deer gun. She drove the barrel straight into the belly of the second man so hard that he fell backward, bounced off a piling, and went down into the shallow water. Other men swarmed onto the pier shouting, but the lobsterman heard only the quiet voice of Brian Halliday in his ear. "Don't mention the B-Field until we close the deal with Smithy. I told Sam they were probably after some buried money." He paused, then shouted, "There must be more, Sam! They had to come in some sort of boat."

Caleb Johnson spent the rest of that night under a feather tick at the

bed-and-breakfast, and the next afternoon, after certain details regarding the transfer of the wharf and other improvements were added to a sales agreement at Halliday's insistence, a check and the deed for Cranberry Island were once more exchanged.

The following morning, Brian Halliday drove to Augusta with what was, apparently, a small TV set in his trunk, and met with Maine's attorney general. Certain speeches and much agitation then occurred in the Maine State Legislature and the U.S. Congress. Within a few days, several electronics firms offered the public a dazzling variety of field detectors guaranteed to warn entrepreneurs, and anyone else, of what *Newsweek* had named "emotional pollution"; while many thoughtful people wondered and worried about what new and even more mischievous wonders might flow from the gnomes of the laboratories, whom *Time* called in a cover story "the electro-wizards."

Hopedale enjoyed its brief fame in the public press, but by late October, everything was quiet again: the reporters and rusticators gone; the lobstering cold and tough, as winter weather began to show its face. But there was usually something to fix the locals' attention, and on the last day of the month, it was Caleb Johnson's new lobster boat, tied at the

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Hopedale Lobster Company's wharf. She was a beauty: fast and powerful, with a great, roomy cockpit; slick, modern hauling gear; and a name that made the lobstermen chuckle and the Smithys wince — *B-Field Baby*.

The grinning men stood in a line looking down into the handsome boat, watching Caleb fuss with some toggles and line. "That's some good-lookin' boat, Caleb," said Sam Colemore. "A man could play tennis in that thing and never lose the ball."

The old man looked up and winked. "Got me a sternman, Sam," he said. "Figure to show you and Madge a thing or two, by gorry." And he pointed up the hill. They all turned and watched in amazed silence as Brian Halliday walked out on the dock, his new rubber boots stiff and shiny-black, his slicker outfit a clean, bright yellow, his thick work gloves still nappy and white.

A good-natured chorus of hoots, catcalls, and joking comments then broke out as Halliday cast loose the lines and then climbed with dignified care down into the new boat.

"Gawd help the lobsters!" laughed Sam Colemore. "We better stay home, boys. They won't be a damn one left for any of us."

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The ex-New Yorker looked up and spoke with mock seriousness. "We intend to leave you a few, Sam. I wouldn't want you to have to give up drawing two cards to bobtailed straights."

While the men roared at that and slapped Colemore on the back, the big lobster boat backed and turned, then rumbled off into the channel and out past Hopedale Point. In the far distance, Cranberry Island twinkled in the fall sun, a small green jewel on the vast blue plane of the sea.



"Let's face it. This is a dog-eat-dog business."

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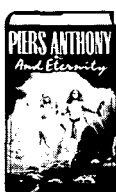
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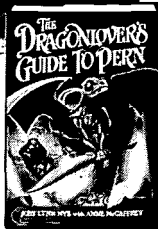
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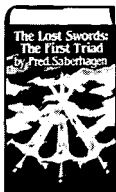
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